

RUUSBROEC

LITERATURE AND MYSTICISM

IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY



By

GEERT WARNAR

Translated by

DIANE WEBB

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BRILL

Ruusbroec

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In this book Ruusbroec's works are referred to in English as follows:

The Realm of Lovers (*Dat rijke der ghelieven*)
The Spiritual Espousals (*Die geestelike brulocht*)
On the Sparkling Stone (*Vanden blinkenden steen*)
On the Four Temptations (*Vanden vier becoringhen*)
On the Christian Faith (*Vanden kerstenen ghelove*)
On the Spiritual Tabernacle (*Van den geesteliken tabernakel*)
On the Seven Enclosures (*Vanden seven sloten*)
A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness (*Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit*)
On Seven Rungs (*Van seven trappen*)
On the Twelve Beguines (*Van den XII beghinen*)
The Booklet of Clarification (*Dat boecksken der verclaringhe*)
Letters (*Brieven*)

Two texts attributed to Ruusbroec in the past are also referred to in English:

On the Twelve Virtues (*Vandan twaelf dogheden*)
On the Holy Sacrament (*Vanden heyleghen sacramente*)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the English translation of a study on Jan van Ruusbroec originally published in Dutch in 2003: *Ruusbroec. Literatuur en mystiek in de veertiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep). It examines Ruusbroec's life and work from the perspective of Dutch literary history, focusing in particular – perhaps more so than an international readership would expect – on his impact on and relation to the literature of the Low Countries. However, it is precisely by taking this context of Ruusbroec's writings into consideration that it is possible to clarify his position in the medieval mystical tradition.

Recently published editions of medieval texts have been added to the bibliography of the original Dutch publication.

The translation of this book was made possible by a generous grant from the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Most of all, I am indebted to Diane Webb for undertaking the difficult task of translating this book. Working with her has been a pleasure and a privilege.

Geert Warnar

INTRODUCTION

CONTESTED WISDOM

Who are the arbiters of history? Within twenty years of his death in 1381, Jan van Ruusbroec – now considered one of the great mystical writers of the Christian tradition and revered during his lifetime as ‘a seraph from heaven, equal to the highest angels’ – was in danger of going down in history as a heretic. While admirers thought him as enlightened as the saintly Pope Gregory the Great, academic theologians voiced objections to Ruusbroec’s books, even though his words were said to have been inspired by God. Serious problems arose in 1399, when Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, was asked to give his opinion of *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec’s masterpiece, which describes a religious universe in which the human spirit can rise to divine heights. Gerson roundly rejected what Ruusbroec had written about utmost perfection and the soul’s union with God, the ground of all existence. According to the laws of theology, there was an absolute distinction between Creator and creature. Gerson was convinced that Ruusbroec had disregarded the ‘sound doctrine of the pious teachers who have spoken of our beatitude’. Moreover, the chancellor thought that the *Espousals* betrayed too much erudition to be credible as a work of divine inspiration.¹

Gerson’s verdict caused great consternation at Groenendaal, a priory near Brussels, where Ruusbroec was revered as one of the founders and the first prior. The mystic’s disciples, who venerated him as one of God’s elect, did everything in their power to persuade others of his saintliness. At Groenendaal, Ruusbroec’s writings were translated into Latin and supplied with introductions that made overt reference to divine revelation as the source of the author’s teachings. The

¹ Quotation Jan van Leeuwen in De Vreese 1895, p. 178: ‘enen scerafin in hemelrike, den hoechsten inghelen ghelike’. All the surviving material relating to the Gerson-Groenendaal controversy was published and analysed in detail in Combes 1945–72. Paraphrased passages and commentary on this study are to be found in Ampe 1975a, pp. 54–261. See also Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 350–58. A clear, concise summary is offered in Burger 1993, pp. 43–45; the passage quoted is on p. 43. A profile of Gerson is included in Decorte 1992, pp. 303–05.

Groenendaal novice-master Jan van Schoonhoven, who had lived with Ruusbroec for a number of years, had already begun to record ‘the glorious life of this holy father’. The text of Schoonhoven’s biography has not survived, but several references to his *vita* suggest that it took the form of a hagiography and had been written in the hope that one day it could be submitted to the ecclesiastical authorities ruling on canonisation. Any chance Ruusbroec stood of becoming a saint seemed to go up in smoke, however, when Gerson began to fulminate against the *Espousals*.²

Gerson was a leading theologian and an academic dignitary of some stature. The double dose of authority the chancellor brought to bear on the matter called for an adequate response from Ruusbroec’s followers. Jan van Schoonhoven himself acted as the spokesman for the Groenendaal community. A graduate of the University of Paris, he was sufficiently versed in theological literature to formulate a scholarly defence of Ruusbroec’s orthodoxy. Gerson remained adamant, however. He continued to denounce Ruusbroec’s earlier theories as madness (*insania*), but admitted that in other works the author of the *Espousals* had plainly distanced himself from his errors. The chancellor was also incensed at Jan van Schoonhoven’s unshakeable belief in Ruusbroec’s inspired authorship and at his defence of the *Espousals* with the argument that God-given wisdom was superior to acquired knowledge. As a devout Christian, Gerson was willing to believe in the existence of revealed truth, but he remained faithful to his academic profession and – with regard to things of higher importance – held fast to theology as the ultimate touchstone. This was what he objected to in the *Espousals*: its lack of a theological framework. Even though Ruusbroec’s bold theories on religious existence were in fact underpinned by Church doctrine, in the end the reader simply had to trust that the author was speaking from his own experience of an exploratory religious life. Gerson found this unacceptable.

But this was not the only reason he picked the *Espousals* to pieces. Gerson had earlier voiced his concerns about the mysticism of pious souls who claimed the privilege of divine revelation and other forms of charismatic spirituality. Similar criticism had been voiced by the

² For the reference to Schoonhoven’s lost *vita*, see Dykmans 1940, pp. 315–16 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 98 (also for the passage quoted) and p. 32, where Ampe seems to have revised his earlier view of the text (Ampe 1975a, pp. 221–30). See Bredero 1993, pp. 37–38, regarding biographies as preparation for canonisation.

theologian Heinrich of Langenstein, who also appears to have raised objections to the *Espousals* as early as 1380. The suspicions of both scholars must have been aroused even more by the Groenendaal initiatives to have Ruusbroec canonised, since it was obvious that there was more to the *Espousals* than the promptings of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, Schoonhoven could rightly point out that Gerson's view of Ruusbroec was distorted, owing to the highly stylised Latin translation he had read. Gerson's distrust, however, was based on more than just the flowery language used by Ruusbroec's Groenendaal confrère Willem Jordaens to dress up the Middle Dutch *Espousals* in 'Latin garb', as the translator himself put it. In Gerson's view it was impossible for an unschooled author to write competently about a subject as complicated as that handled in the *Espousals*.³

That was the end of the matter, as far as the chancellor was concerned, and Jan van Schoonhoven could do little more than assess the damage. He had barely managed to save Ruusbroec from the everlasting disgrace of being branded a heretic, but the mystic's reputation as a divinely inspired writer had suffered greatly, shattering the Groenendaal brothers' dreams of seeing a saint emerge from their ranks. Schoonhoven's *vita* of Ruusbroec soon sank into oblivion, but the mystic's followers clung tenaciously to his image as a man touched by divine inspiration. Around 1420 Henricus Pomerius began to write his history of the origins of the Groenendaal priory, *De origine monasterii Viridisvallis*, announcing right from the start that he would devote a separate volume of his chronicle to 'the blessed life and holy morals of the long-devoted father, Brother Jan van Ruusbroec, the first prior of Groenendaal'.⁴

From the very beginning, the underlying tone of the Middle Dutch version of *De origine* makes it clear – more so than the Latin original – that the Groenendaal brothers had not lost their faith in Ruusbroec. In

³ See Vauchez 1981, p. 474, on the attitude of Gerson and Langenstein; cf. Elliot 2002, p. 30. See also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 84 and Dinzelbacher 1994, pp. 381–84. On Jordaens as a translator, see De Baere 1993.

⁴ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 117: 'dat salige leven ende heilige seden des alre devoets vaders brueder Johannes van Ruysbroec des iersten priors van Gruenendael'; cf. De Leu 1885, p. 265. The text of *De origine* published in De Leu 1885 was based on a single manuscript, disregarding the sometimes drastic textual variants in other copies. An overview of the manuscript is given in Lievens 1960a and Persoons 1960. This book usually quotes from the Middle Dutch translation (published in Verdeyen 1981b), which in many cases appears to follow a more informative Latin exemplar. See Ampe 1975a, pp. 242–46, regarding the need for textual criticism of *De origine*.

a long series of stories, Pomerius illustrates the extent to which Ruusbroec distinguished himself *in spiritualibus* from his less gifted brethren, starting with an early sign: at the age of just seven days he stood up in the wash basin, just as he would later be lifted up in spirit to the contemplation of the divine. Clearly, Ruusbroec was a child prodigy. He discovered early on that the only thing to be gained from routine education was ‘vanity and arrogance’ (*ydelheit ende hoverdie*) and therefore chose to attend ‘the school of godly wisdom’ (*gaen ter scole der godliker wijsheit*).⁵

From reports of revelations, visions, prophecies, true priesthood and the exemplary practice of monastic virtues, Pomerius created a biography in which the contours of a saint’s life are clearly recognisable. Though passages from Schoonhoven’s *vita* were undoubtedly incorporated in *De origine*, it can no longer be determined how Pomerius adapted the older text to serve his purposes. It is certain, however, that Ruusbroec’s second biographer was so intent on restoring the mystic’s reputation that he took great liberties with the *vita*. Giving the facts a new twist, Pomerius made it look as though Gerson’s objections to Ruusbroec’s alleged lack of education were based on a misunderstanding that had been quickly cleared up by Jan van Schoonhoven’s letter. Whereupon Gerson, in defiance of his own views, had to admit that ‘the light of natural understanding’ was not enough to enable one to follow Ruusbroec ‘in the loftiness of his godly contemplations’.⁶

*

Now, six centuries later, the conflict over the *Espousals* mainly elicits sympathy for the unnecessary distress it caused. The fears of the Groenendaal community proved, with hindsight, to be unfounded. The commotion caused by Gerson hardly made a dent in the popularity of Ruusbroec’s writings. In the course of the fifteenth century, his treatises were painstakingly copied and widely disseminated. Gradually the mystic grew into a leading figure in the religious history of the Netherlands. Ruusbroec continued to exert an influence on other writers until well

⁵ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 140 (De Leu 1885, p. 287).

⁶ For the quotations from Pomerius (‘den lichte der natuerliker verstandenis’ and ‘in die hoeheit sijne godliker contemplacien’), see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 141 (De Leu 1885, p. 287). On the relationship between the texts by Schoonhoven and Pomerius, see O’Sheridan 1925; Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 213–18; Axters 1962, pp. 112–15. See Bredero 1993, pp. 69–73, on the revision of existing biographies.

past the Middle Ages, and every history of Dutch literature gives pride of place to the writer of the *Espousals*, one of the most frequently translated texts in the literature of the Low Countries. In modern times Ruusbroec has grown so much in stature that a learned society even bears his name: the Ruusbroec Society in Antwerp, founded more than seventy-five years ago as a centre of expertise on the history of spirituality in the Low Countries.⁷

When Pomerius began writing his chronicle, it was impossible to say whether Ruusbroec would be rehabilitated or remain in disgrace. What Ruusbroec's followers considered his infinite wisdom was brushed aside by Gerson as complete lunacy. Such mutual recriminations turned the controversy over the *Espousals* into a head-on collision between theology and mysticism, and this happened at a difficult time in the history of religious thought. After a long period in which medieval mysticism had blossomed, there was growing scepticism regarding philosophical reflection on the union with God, which Ruusbroec described in his *Espousals* as the 'simple ground of our eternal likeness in a darkness from which shines an immeasurable light'. Such daring paradoxes, presented as solutions to the great mystery of being, had always been surrounded by controversy, but after 1400 such abstract spiritual discourse was increasingly viewed as pure delusion.⁸

Since Gerson had made his suspicions about the *Espousals* known to the world and the Groenendaal community continued to hold fast to the image of Ruusbroec as a divinely inspired writer, it had become impossible to present an objective view. Pomerius was either unwilling or unable to present the author of the *Espousals* as a mystical theologian. While Schoonhoven had attempted to demonstrate that Ruusbroec had followed in the footsteps of recognised authorities in the field, Pomerius resolutely turned the mystic into an inspired soul drenched 'with the dew of divine grace' (*metten dauwe der godliker gracie*) that

⁷ For an overview of Ruusbroec's influence and the research done on this subject, see Ampe 1975a; exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 263–481, 483–509; Mertens 1993c and 1993d. An overview of the Latin translations of Ruusbroec's works is to be found in De Baere 1989, pp. 139–40. On the Ruusbroec Society, see De Borchgrave 2001 and Willaert 1994, pp. 2–15.

⁸ On this subject in general, see Leclercq, Vandenbroucke & Bouyer 1961, pp. 487–533; on Ruusbroec in particular, see Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 298–301 and 381–90. On the characteristics of fourteenth-century mysticism, see also Davies 1988. See Mertens 1993a, pp. 20–22, for a broad outline of mysticism in Middle Dutch literature.

enabled him to climb to a level of divine contemplation unattainable ‘through the common use of logic or with the subtleties of the natural arts of philosophy’.⁹ Pomerius placed Ruusbroec’s books, which in the final analysis represent the fruits of his intellectual exertions, wholly in the light of ‘divine revelation’ (*godliker revelacien*), and energetically set about isolating the mystic’s writings from their controversial context in order to present them as an example of divine favour. This image of Ruusbroec persisted. With his remarkably cultivated literary style, Pomerius introduced a new form of monastic historiography that was followed in the Low Countries until well into the sixteenth century. At the same time, *De origine* grew to be the authoritative source on Ruusbroec’s life.

Gerson’s imputations thus had a long-lasting effect. The chancellor’s criticism was, after all, the immediate cause of Pomerius’s revision of Ruusbroec’s image in *De origine*. The picture presented in that chronicle continued to exert an influence on the appreciation of the mystic and his texts until long after the first scholarly studies on Ruusbroec and his teachings were published in the nineteenth century. Now one can turn to an extensive body of literature in which Ruusbroec’s teachings are presented as a great monument in the mystical tradition, but the historical dimensions of this grand oeuvre have been given short shrift. Despite a plethora of publications, there is still no study on Ruusbroec that even begins to meet the minimum requirements of a writer’s biography, by providing insight into those factors in the author’s milieu and mentality that influenced the creation of his oeuvre.¹⁰

Such a study must be carried out in the sphere in which the author of the *Espousals* has become an unassailable eminence: the history of literature. The huge increase in the number of theological and religious studies devoted to his writings seems to have propelled Ruusbroec into an orbit outside the sphere of literary history. On a high level in the history of ideas he has been compared with such figures as Heidegger, Spinoza and Buddhist mystics from the Far East. Nevertheless, we know relatively little about Ruusbroec’s relations with his contemporaries, which is not to say that they were unimportant. Ruusbroec did not produce his writings in the company of the great thinkers of contem-

⁹ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 126: ‘der ghemeynder ghewoente der logiken of met subtylheit der natuerliker consten van philozophien’; cf. De Leu 1885, p. 273.

¹⁰ On Pomerius, see Warnar 1997c; for a broader perspective, cf. Van Engen 1992 and Scheepsma 1996, pp. 218–24.

plative literature; rather, he wrote in the midst of the Brussels beguines, the mendicant orders and other representatives of fourteenth-century religious culture. Some of his writings were addressed to individuals, so that his intended audience included not only clerics, priests, preachers, pious widows and learned masters, but also – quite specifically – a hermit, a church reformer, a converted banker and an impassioned priory cook, all of whom make an appearance in this book.¹¹

In the often high-flown literature on Ruusbroec's mysticism, the historicity of his texts has sometimes been relegated to the background. Even so, this is no reason for disdain, for such abstraction is inherent in any transcendental subject. The direct experience of God's presence – the simplified but effective definition of mysticism that is used in this book – takes place in the spirit, which must free itself of all transitory things in order to be receptive to the absolute. The reader of the *Espousals* is even confronted with a new language, in which the spirit must 'strip' itself of all 'images' to become 'empty', and in which all preoccupation with the 'multiplicity' (*menichvoudicheit*) of worldly things must give way to a 'unity of spirit' (*enicheit des geestes*). Ruusbroec describes a spiritual reality that can easily be entered and understood without asking what the author's world was like or how his life was linked to his message. The affair with Gerson shows, however, that Ruusbroec's mysticism was indeed time-bound and that the arbiters of history could have passed a very different judgement on the *Espousals*.

By looking back at the time before the skirmishes over Ruusbroec's masterpiece, we can add a surprising amount of detail to the existing picture of the mystic of Groenendaal. Nevertheless, a study of Ruusbroec's life and work is not easy if one demands irrefutable facts. There is scant information on Ruusbroec's life. The uncertainties already begin with the dating of his texts; in fact, we know only the order in which they were written. In the course of his remarkably long life (1293–1381) Ruusbroec wrote eleven treatises, but only one can be dated (on the

¹¹ See Hubbeling 1973 (Spinoza), Sikka 1997, pp. 225–64 (Heidegger) and Mommaers & Van Bracht 1995 (Buddhism). Cf. also Westenbroek 1999 and Oegema 1999, pp. 183–85, for examples of Ruusbroec's influence on modern poets in the Low Countries. Earlier studies of Ruusbroec's life and work are to be found in Van Mierlo 1910 (closely based on Pomerius), Underhill 1914 and d'Asbeck 1928 – whose shortcomings are overemphasised in Ampe 1975a, pp. 634–36, at the expense of what is certainly a fresh outlook – and Verdeyen 1981a, reworked in Verdeyen 1996, which makes unacknowledged use of Warnar 1993c and 1994 and other sources. See also Warnar 1993b, 1997a and b, 1999a, 2000a, 2002a and b.

basis of notes found in extant copies): *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* was sent to a Rich Clare in 1359. Information gleaned from colophons and headings in manuscripts enable us to place Ruusbroec's texts in relation to the most important changes in his life. His first years as a writer, however, remain shrouded in mystery. Ruusbroec wrote his early works, including the *Espousals*, while serving as a chaplain in Brussels. At first these texts were read by only a small number of like-minded individuals. Wider reception of Ruusbroec's works began when he and several kindred spirits settled in the former hermitage at Groenendaal, where they started a new life as priests of their own chapel. It was there that Ruusbroec began his most extensive work, *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, an exegetical commentary, the bulk of which was probably completed before 1350. In that year the residents of Groenendaal decided to convert their community of priests into a priory of canons regular who embraced the rule of St Augustine. By this time Ruusbroec – a spiritual guide with a growing flock of followers – was fifty-seven, but he was to continue his literary work to a ripe old age.¹²

These, then, are the sketchy facts of Ruusbroec's life: a tattered backdrop to a historical study, which can add but few threads to its frayed fabric. Apart from his writings, Ruusbroec left almost no trace of his existence. From the Groenendaal documents we can glean – as Pomerius did – that during his years in Brussels Ruusbroec was a chaplain at the Collegiate Church of St Gudula, though his name does not appear in the archives of that institution. For much of our more or less factual information on Ruusbroec we have no authority other than Pomerius, to whose words we will often have recourse – not from any naive hope of finding truthful accounts of actual events, but simply because *De origine* remains, despite its hagiographic distortions, an indispensable source of information on the mystic's life. As a biographer Pomerius was in a privileged position, able – as he himself testified – to gain information from Groenendaal canons who were old enough to have lived with Ruusbroec. Furthermore, Pomerius had access to now-lost documents from the monastic archives, including Schoonhoven's *vita*.

As long as it remains wise to do so, we will take advantage of *De origine*, even though it offers no answers to a number of essential ques-

¹² On the chronology of Ruusbroec's works, see in particular Warnar 1994, despite the differing conclusions in Kienhorst & Kors 2001, esp. p. 95, where the authors ignore the fact that Pomerius did have enough information at his disposal to establish the chronological order of Ruusbroec's works.

tions and sometimes forces us to rectify the confusing legend created by Pomerius. In order to identify the cultural-historical underpinnings of Ruusbroec's writings, we must go in search of the circumstances of the author's life, the people with whom he shared his insights, and the intellectual, religious and social influences to which he was exposed. This will be undertaken not with the intention of cutting the peerless mystic down to human size, but rather in the firm conviction that this is the only way to do justice to a great name in the literature of the Low Countries.

CHAPTER I

BRUSSELS

1. Ancestry and Inwardness

If earthly creatures do not wish
The Lord's commandments to obey,
His wrath will cause Him to unleash
His anger on both poor and rich.
Indeed this happens every day.

*Als gode niet en willen wiken
Die erdsche creaturen,
So doet hi sine abolghe striken
Beide ten armen ende ten riken
Dit valt noch tselker uren.*¹

In 1299 the anonymous Brabantine poet who penned this verse sensed impending doom all around. The decline of knighthood and the nobility had led to the ultimate defeat of the crusaders, who had been forced to surrender their last stronghold in the Holy Land. The whole of the Church, from priest to pope, was riddled with greed. Close to home, war seemed inevitable, now that the Duchy of Brabant had become embroiled in the struggle between the kings of England and France. The poet's graceless stanza betrays bleak prospects for the fourteenth century, but his pessimism had nothing to do with medieval *fin-de-siècle* fears: he had simply seen a comet, and that was rarely a good sign.

Within twenty years the same cosmic phenomenon inspired another writer from Brabant, the chronicler Lodewijk van Velthem, to discuss a whole series of prophecies foretelling the last days. In 1315 a comet had appeared in the sky, presaging catastrophes which, according to Velthem, heralded the end of time. He had meanwhile seen with his own eyes how relentless rainfall had destroyed the crops in the summer of 1315, resulting in famine and an epidemic that claimed so many

¹ Hegman 1958, verses 154–58.

lives that the fallow fields outside the cities had to be put to use as burial grounds.²

Born in 1293 in the Duchy of Brabant, Jan van Ruusbroec might have seen both comets, but other circumstances are to blame for the ill-starred beginning of his life. The sources maintain a discreet silence very likely meant to conceal his illegitimate birth. Pomerius says nothing at all about Ruusbroec's father, and portrays his mother as a single parent, who reluctantly let her son go at the age of eleven, when he left his native village of Ruusbroec to attend school in Brussels. The boy moved in with a relative, Jan Hinckaert, a chaplain at the Church of St Gudula in Brussels. Following her child to the city, the mother became a beguine and henceforth saw her son only from a distance.

Even without the dramatic separation from his mother, the move to Brussels would have brought about a huge change in the life of young Ruusbroec. His birthplace was a mere hamlet, whereas Brussels was by fourteenth-century standards a big city, with flourishing trade and industry and growing allure as the new residence of the dukes of Brabant. Ruusbroec, moreover, found himself part of a wealthy and influential patrician family. Gerelm, the father of Jan Hinckaert, had repeatedly served as an alderman. He was the *pater familias* of one of the seven clans (or *lignages*) from whose ranks the members of the Brussels city council were appointed. Within this oligarchy there was a complicated network of interdependent kinships and relationships based on what we today would consider a very broad definition of family. It is unclear how Ruusbroec was related to the Hinckaerts, the main stumbling block being that the various versions of *De origine* refer to his ties to Jan Hinckaert only in very vague terms. Some manuscripts speak simply of a 'family relationship' (*affinitas generis*), but one copy of *De origine* calls Hinckaert a blood relation of Ruusbroec – *cognati sui* – rendered in the Middle Dutch translation simply as 'his relative' (*zijn maech*) and *neve* (meaning not only 'nephew' or 'cousin' but also, in a broader sense, 'friend' or 'relative').³

² The poem is the *Vierde Martijn*, published in Hegman 1958. On the comet occurring in this poem, see Van Gijzen 1993. For Velthem's continuation of the *Spiegel historiel*, see book VI, chapters 6 and 21–25 (Vander Linden *et al.* 1906–38, vol. III). Regarding the historical context, see Blockmans *et al.* 1982, pp. 56–60.

³ On the city of Brussels in Ruusbroec's day, see Martens 1976, esp. pp. 124–30, concerning the urban oligarchy. For Ruusbroec's illegitimate birth, see Martens 1990, esp. pp. 63–72 and Lievens 1981 (the latter also discusses the possibility of Hinckaert's paternity, based on information taken from Schimmelpfennig 1979). For more on the

The philological stemma of *De origine* and all its variants is, however, more transparent than the Hinckaerts' family tree, which does in fact include a Jan who was a cousin of Jan Hinckaert. This Jan was the son of Willem van Eleghem, another presumably illegitimate descendant of Gerelm Hinckaert. This Willem has often been put forward as the possible father of the mystic, though he is certainly not the only candidate. Ruusbroec's paternity has even been assigned to Jan Hinckaert himself. He would not have been the first priest to succumb to the temptations of the flesh, nor was it unusual for ordained priests to admit their progeny to their households and provide them with a good education. Prominent canons of the Chapter of St Gudula openly combined parenthood and important ecclesiastical functions. Ruusbroec counted this among the worst excesses of the clerical state: 'Some, who live off the goods of the Holy Church and should be pure in body and soul, offer their children a home – openly and shamelessly, and with great pleasure, as though they had conceived them with a lawful wife.'⁴

Ruusbroec's sharp tone seems to exonerate Hinckaert once and for all from any presumed paternity, since it is highly unlikely that the mystic would reproach Hinckaert in this way after living with him like a son for more than thirty years. There is nothing to indicate that Hinckaert's relationship with his young house guest was anything more than the *affinitas generis* of which Pomerius writes; moreover, it is quite possible that Ruusbroec was not even related to the Hinckaerts on his father's side.

Remarkably, in their fruitless investigation into Ruusbroec's ancestry, researchers have overlooked apparently much more concrete information on a woman who was possibly his sister: Margriet van Meerbeke. It was for this Rich Clare from the Brussels Coudenklooster that Ruusbroec would write *On the Seven Enclosures*, a text announced in a fifteenth-century copy as 'an epistle which the priest Jan Ruusbroec

question of Ruusbroec's paternal descent, see Stracke 1931, p. 73 and Axters 1950–60, vol. II, p. 219. Verdeyen 1981a, p. 10 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 34, do not pronounce judgement on the matter.

⁴ On Willem van Eleghem, see Ruelens 1905, p. XLIV and Martens 1990, pp. 66–69. For Brussels priests with children, see Martens 1990, pp. 80–81. Quotation *Tabernacle* 5:6040–44: 'Deghene die van der heilegher kerken goede leven ende reine soudē sijn van sielen ende van live, si houden, some, hare kindere binnen haren huuse, oppenbaerleec ende sonder scaemde; in groeter behaghelheit also ochte sise van haren ghetrouden wiven hadden.' For indications of the relationship between Hinckaert and Ruusbroec, see also Ampe 1981a, p. 177.

sent to his sister'. That the scribe drew this conclusion is perfectly understandable. In the *Enclosures* Ruusbroec addresses Margriet three times as 'dear sister' (*lieve zuster*). These words could, of course, merely express affection for a nun, although the intimate tone and personal subject matter of the work written for Margriet give the impression that Ruusbroec was impelled by concern for the spiritual well-being of a kinswoman. In one place he seems to speak explicitly of family ties: 'I want to teach my sister how to serve in humility and purity'.⁵

Apart from the *Enclosures*, we find nothing to indicate that Margriet was Ruusbroec's sister or half-sister, but the name Van Meerbeke does occur earlier in connection with the Hinckaert family. Opposite the nearly adjacent houses belonging to the chaplain Jan Hinckaert and his father, Gerelm, there lived around 1305 a beguine called Hedwig van Meerbeek, who was perhaps related to the Hinckaerts. Beguines who did not live in beguinages often remained in the family circle. This would clarify to some extent Ruusbroec's relations with the Hinckaerts, but it does not solve the mystery of his paternity.⁶

*

As unfortunate as it was in the fourteenth century to be an illegitimate child, Ruusbroec could consider himself blessed in his family ties, for his life certainly took a turn for the better in Brussels. Jan Hinckaert assumed the role of foster father and protector, seeing to it that his protégé received holy orders and was given a position as vicar choral at the Collegiate Church of St Gudula, meaning that, in the absence of one of the canons, Ruusbroec took his place in the liturgical offices. To begin with, however, Hinckaert sent his young ward to school, for it was there that the foundation was laid for a career in the Church. That the boy's education turned out as well as it did was entirely owing to Jan Hinckaert and his wealthy family. Ruusbroec had no doubt

⁵ For the quotations, see the *Enclosures*: title variants ('een epistel die her Jan Ruusbroeck seynde sijnder suster') and 254–55 ('ic wille leeren mier suster hoe si dienen sal in oetmoede ende in reynicheiden').

⁶ On Ruusbroec and Margriet, see also V.2. For the sister passages, see *Enclosures*, 1–2, 15–16 and 258–63. On Hedwig van Meerbeke, see Martens 1990, pp. 18–19; see Mommaers 1989, p. 33, regarding beguines who lived with their families. Another possible link between the Hinckaert and Meerbeke families is the Gerelm Hinckaert who was provost of the Brussels Canons of St Jacob op den Coudenberg from 1310 to 1329. He owned property in the village of Meerbeke (Van Derveeghe 1971, pp. 968–69).



Fig. 1 Altar dedicated to Jan van Ruusbroec in the village church of Ruisbroek.

attended the parish school in his native village, but it was not customary for the child of a penniless beguine to receive advanced education at the chapter school. Only in 1358 did the Brussels chaplain Petrus van Huffel establish a fund to finance the education of twelve ‘poor pupils’ (*bonifantes*). When the wealthy Hinckaert family undertook to educate Ruusbroec, however, the cost would not have been a problem.⁷

It was only natural for Jan Hinckaert to take the youth under his wing; himself a chaplain, he had chosen the ecclesiastical career that was to be Ruusbroec’s future as well. Since 1296 Hinckaert had lived in a house near St Gudula’s, not far from the chapter school, which was the leading public institution of higher learning in Brussels and the surrounding area. Pupils coming from elsewhere were forced to seek board and lodging in the city. Those such as Ruusbroec who could find accommodation with relatives possessed a distinct advantage. Hinckaert probably also paid the youngster’s school fees and the costs of his upkeep, for such expenses would have been well within his means.

Hinckaert received a prebend for serving the chapel of St John the Evangelist in the Church of St Gudula. In 1304, the year Ruusbroec moved to Brussels, the chapel was founded by one Elisabeth, further described as the widow of Jan, son of Gerelm. Perhaps she also belonged to the Hinckaert family. If so, the chapel was a family matter, in terms of both capital and personnel, and by caring for young Ruusbroec, Jan Hinckaert may have been returning a favour. Relations of this kind between the chapter and the people of Brussels were the order of the day. Numerous chapels in the side aisles of St Gudula’s were served by priests from Brussels families and were endowed by relatives. Recorded variously as an intermediary, a curate and a witness, Jan Hinckaert was regularly involved in appointments and donations. As a networker in the ecclesiastical business of the city, he had plenty of opportunity to recommend his young protégé to the more pious members of the patriciate.⁸

The significance of Hinckaert’s patronage for Ruusbroec’s development into a spiritual writer should not be underestimated. Other great

⁷ On Hinckaert’s involvement in Ruusbroec’s education, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 126 and 137 (De Leu 1885, pp. 273 and 284). See Baratz 1994, pp. 219–20, on the *bonifantes*.

⁸ See Ruelens 1905, p. XLIV, on the location of Jan Hinckaert’s house, and pp. LXXXI–LXXXIII, for records of his activities. See Martens 1990, p. 64 and Lefèvre 1933, p. 393, for information on Elisabeth and the founding of the Chapel of St John; nothing is known of possible descendants of Elisabeth and Jan, the son of Gerelm.

mystical authors of his day – such as Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse and Johannes Tauler – entered a religious order at a young age. These German Dominicans grew up in an atmosphere in which their spiritual inclinations were fuelled by intensive study and constant contact with like-minded friars. Their order prepared them for a life of preaching the gospel. In comparison, Ruusbroec's situation, first as a vicar choral and later as a chaplain, would have been much less inspiring, but living as he did the life of a 'very devout young cleric' (*zeer devoet jonghe cleric*) in Hinckaert's household would have given him the opportunity to immerse himself in scripture, as indeed most medieval schoolboys did. Holland's court chaplain, Dirc van Delft, wrote around 1400 that the clerics' duties included assisting the priest at Divine Office and at Mass. They were also expected, on their own, to chant psalms and study not only the Bible but also canon law and the customs of the Church.⁹

That Ruusbroec's writings would one day push back the boundaries of Middle Dutch literature was due primarily to his innate disposition, but this achievement would have been impossible without a profound knowledge of theology. This phase in Ruusbroec's development as an author unfolded chiefly under the tutelage of Jan Hinckaert – in whom the mystic had found both a Maecenas and a mentor; for even though the wealthy priest's primary concern was to look after young Ruusbroec as a member of the family, he must soon have perceived the boy's exceptional character and talents. Although Pomerius suggests in *De origine* that only after a sudden conversion did Hinckaert abandon a way of life that was very worldly indeed, this is not to say that he had previously taken no interest in higher things. Hinckaert spent a large part of his income on the accessories of choral prayer. The archives reveal that he enriched Groenendaal's collection of books by donating magnificent manuscripts for the liturgy: the priory's best large breviary, for example, its best missal (in two volumes) and another liturgical book in five parts, intended for the celebration of 'three masses a week in perpetuity and for ever more'. In 1350 Hinckaert also donated a beautiful

⁹ On Ruusbroec's social position, see Warnar 1997b, esp. pp. 108–11 and Warnar 1999a, pp. 379–85. For an authoritative overview of the German mystics Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Seuse (and the mystical preachers and authors in their milieu, coming from the ranks of the Dominicans), see Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, pp. 214–528. See Mulchahey 1998 on Dominican education. The Dirc van Delft quotation was taken from the *Tafel vanden kersten gelove, Winterstuc*, chapter 19/233–36. The quotation concerning Ruusbroec as a cleric is to be found in Verdeyen 1981b, p. 126; for the Latin version (*juvenis mirae devotionis*), cf. De Leu 1885, p. 273.

chalice. The owner of such valuable books and precious objects must have been both a rich man and a devoted priest, for it was certainly not customary, among Hinckaert's fellow clerics, to own a personal reference library for the liturgical office, even assuming they could afford it. A look at his priestly belongings suggests that Hinckaert took his task seriously, and the example he set no doubt exerted a powerful influence on the young Ruusbroec.¹⁰

Jan Hinckaert would have had to further the ecclesiastical career of his ward in another way as well. Officially the higher ordinations were reserved for priests born in wedlock. Illegitimate sons were excluded from the priesthood as long as the problem of their *defectus natalium* had not been solved by dispensation. This could be obtained by submitting a petition to the department of the papal Curia specially created to handle dispensational procedures: the *penitentiaria apostolica*. The granting of dispensation entailed costs that, for many, proved an insurmountable obstacle on the path to ecclesiastical office. On this score, too, Ruusbroec was doubtless indebted to his family.

Anyone who hopes to find the key to Ruusbroec's paternity in the papal archives is looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack – the haystack consisting in this case of the sixteen-volume inventory of the missives issued by John XXII during his pontificate (1316–34). In the indexes to these books (which alone fill three volumes), the name Johannes occurs many times with reference to individuals from all over Europe. Not one, however, seems identifiable as the young 'Johannes van Ruusbroec', but this is no reason to relegate the *petite histoire* of Ruusbroec's illegitimate birth to the realm of fantasy. Sometimes one stroke of the papal pen was all it took to release whole groups from the *defectus natalium*. On 14 February 1317 dispensation was granted in one fell swoop to three hundred unnamed brothers with an ordained father or unwed parents. On 13 December of the same year, ten unspecified clerics received the same favour. These high numbers have to do with a new pontificate, in this case that of John XXII. The installation of a new pope was a suitable moment for grace and dispensation; perhaps Ruusbroec – ordained as a priest in 1318 – also availed himself of this opportunity.¹¹

¹⁰ Regarding Hinckaert's property, see Dykmans 1940, pp. 175 and 341–42: 'van 3 missen ter weken ewelic ende emmermeer ghedaen te werden'.

¹¹ On the removal of the *defectus natalium*, see Schimmelpfennig 1979, p. 46 (also p. 37 regarding the beginning of a pontificate as an appropriate time to grant dispen-

Ruusbroec did not have to worry too much that his request would be denied. During the pontificate of John XXII, the pope and his agents signed more than six hundred letters releasing prospective priests from their *defectus natalium*. The glorious ecclesiastical career that was possible after dispensation is illustrated by the story of Jan van Esselen, a Brussels canon who may well have been a personal acquaintance of Ruusbroec. This Jan was a nephew of Vranke vanden Coudenberg – the later provost of Groenendaal – who at some point joined Ruusbroec and Jan Hinckaert in their Brussels household. Jan van Esselen was granted dispensation for his illegitimate birth no fewer than four times, which enabled his career to advance by leaps and bounds. Perhaps his spectacular progress was due in large part to his father, none other than Jan II, Duke of Brabant, who had fathered the boy on Coudenberg's sister Elisabeth, just as she was on the point of becoming a hospital sister.¹²

There are similarities here to Ruusbroec's presumed ancestry, but his humble office of chaplain suggests that his mother's romance was less princely, and thus less conducive to a secure future. According to Pomerius, Ruusbroec's dead mother appeared to him in visions, asking how long it would be before he was ordained, for only then would she be released from purgatory. On the day Ruusbroec first said Mass, it was revealed to him that his mother had been assumed into heavenly glory. Was Ruusbroec stricken with remorse at the fate of his mother, whom he had barely seen since his departure for Brussels? Or was he plagued by doubt about the outcome of his request for dispensation? These visions made such a deep impression on Ruusbroec that he was still talking about them as an old man in Groenendaal. Moreover, one might be inclined to see the impact of this childhood experience on the passage from *The Spiritual Espousals* about praying for the souls of those in purgatory. It is possible, Ruusbroec asserts, for 'the spirit of God' (*den gheeste gods*) to prompt one to pray for one person in particular. Provided this is not self-gratification but the work of the Holy Spirit, and provided the prayer is heartfelt and fervent, then the person praying

sation). This material is treated in more detail in Schmutge 1995; on the procedures described here, see pp. 33–51. The letters of Pope John XXII are edited in Mollat & Lesquen 1900–47.

¹² Regarding Elisabeth, see Van Parijs 1957–71, pp. 647–48; for the dispensations granted to Jan van Esselen, see Fayen 1908–12, vol. II, nos. 1894, 2451, 2885 and vol. I, no. 1034, with regard to his mother.

will receive a sign that his supplication has been heard, and at that very moment both ‘the impulse of the spirit and the prayer will cease’ (*cesseert die dreft des geests ende dat ghebet*).¹³

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Ruusbroec’s life and literary work are rarely so closely intertwined as they seem to be here. His personal outpourings can be counted on the fingers of one hand, for he almost always kept silent about his own religious experiences. Ruusbroec’s works have been praised up to the present day as the fruits of a rich spiritual life, which makes his seeming reluctance to speak of his own religious sensibility all the more curious. Receptiveness to visions was considered one of the hallmarks of the mystic, but nearly all the information on Ruusbroec’s spiritual intuition comes from Pomerius’s chronicle. When the mystic speaks of visions and revelations, he bases himself on a set typology rooted in old theories of the Church Father Augustine.¹⁴

In the coming chapters we will often find that Ruusbroec’s texts are more useful in gleaning information about his library than in plumbing the depths of his soul. Perhaps, however, we should make a virtue of necessity by interpreting the few facts at our disposal and concluding that the successful composition of the *Espousals* reflects the equilibrium of the author, who was obviously able to resist the potentially unsettling influences of life in a bustling city like Brussels.

Ruusbroec’s intellectual life continued to grow even as the disastrous events of the fourteenth century unfolded. Two years after Ruusbroec had moved into Jan Hinckaert’s household, Duke Jan II cruelly ended the short-lived regime of the Brussels guilds. The textile workers, who had driven the rich patricians out of the town hall, were in turn crushed by the duke’s troops. More than seventy insurgents were killed in the struggle, and a number of their comrades buried alive. Brabantine chroniclers remembered this popular uprising – which likewise took place in other cities in Brabant – as one of the most dramatic events in more than a century. This is also how they characterised the pilgrimage to the Holy Land undertaken several years later by a group of paupers and vagabonds from Brabant. Before this motley multitude

¹³ *Espousals* b1199–1207 (quotation b1207). Van Mierlo 1910, p. 259, was the first to establish this connection between Ruusbroec’s life and work.

¹⁴ See Langer 1987, pp. 215–20, on typology, as well as *Espousals* b549–591. See also II.3.

even crossed the duchy's borders, their pilgrimage had deteriorated into murder and mayhem.¹⁵

None of this tumult resounds in Ruusbroec's books. Medieval mysticism may have been a social phenomenon, but it was far too focused on immutable truths to create much social tension. Nevertheless, the incidents occurring in Brussels, as well as the 1315 famine recorded by Lodewijk van Velthem, were signs of Ruusbroec's troubled times. Despite this baleful backdrop to the fourteenth century, the young mystic derived such strength from his trust in God that his religious convictions took precedence over all else. This made one capable of

uplifting the mind
above all humankind,
the lofty heights inwardly pursued.
To behold the Lord's goodness,
and flee His unlikeness,
that is spiritual fortitude.

*dat ghemoede verheven
boven alle die leven
op gherecht in innicheyt.
Die goedde Gods te aensiene
al onghelijc te vliene
dat es gheestelijcke starckheit.*¹⁶

Summarising strophes of this kind can be found at the end of each chapter of Ruusbroec's earliest work, *The Realm of Lovers*. Encapsulated in these lines of verse is a transcendental philosophy of life that proposes to banish all worldly thoughts as potential pitfalls on the path to God. These lines probably date from so long after the Brussels revolt or the famine of 1315 that there is no need to suspect them of religious escapism. The pious verses articulate a message of complete self-abnegation:

He who yearns for earthly savour
cannot gain in any measure
utmost joy and ecstasy.
He cannot be illuminated,
for his mind is inundated
with pictures of mortality.

¹⁵ *Brabantsche Yeesten*, book V, verses 501–622; quotation 617–22 (Willems & Bormans 1839–69, vol. II). For the Brussels revolt, see Bonenfant 1920; for the crusade initiatives of 1309, see Housley 1986, pp. 145–46.

¹⁶ *Realm* 1172–77.

*Die soect eertsche smake,
hi en can niet gheraken
in die hoeghe ghebrukeleecheit
Hi en mach niet verclaren
want hi es verladen
met beelden der vergankeleecheit.¹⁷*

These confident statements suggest that Ruusbroec's longing for higher things sprang from an innate disposition. His talent for renouncing all earthly pleasures must have been impressive indeed, but effort was required none the less. This becomes abundantly clear when reading two songs (*cantiones*) included as an encore in the Latin edition of Ruusbroec's works printed by the Carthusians of Cologne in 1552. In the *cantiones* the poet applauds a new-found frame of mind in which he rises above himself to reach mystical heights, but this supernatural state of awareness cannot be attained without a struggle:

Now I have renounced all things; my being is so rich that no one can tempt me any more. Earlier, when I was pitifully led astray and trapped, the world held me so much in thrall that I could not in the least escape the burden; I had strayed so far from myself in fluctuating and unstable things. But now I have found release from these bonds, a release I have long sought and often attempted.¹⁸

Is this Ruusbroec's account of his spiritual breakthrough? Ruusbroec's authorship of the poems has often been questioned, even after a Dutch version of the songs was found in a manuscript filled with Latin texts relating to Ruusbroec – including copies of letters addressed to him. Strong objections to Ruusbroec's possible authorship were based on the exultant tone of the songs and their autobiographical nature, which differs greatly from the objective approach typical of Ruusbroec's treatises. These differences, however, characterise the genres more than the author. The treatise was the appropriate form for discourse, whereas the conventions of the medieval lyric were more conducive to expressing emotions. This did not necessarily emanate from an irrepressible urge to express oneself; it could just as easily be prompted by a desire to inspire or edify.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Realm* 2222–27.

¹⁸ Lievens 1957a, pp. 120–21.

¹⁹ On these two songs, see Lievens 1957a, with publication of the Dutch version and the missing stanzas translated into Latin by Surius. Regarding the manuscript, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 89. Here – as well as in Ampe 1975a, pp. 421–22 and Axters 1950–60, vol. II, p. 241 – Ruusbroec's authorship of the two songs is rejected.

The (pseudo-)biographical nature of the songs does not argue against Ruusbroec's authorship. In the summarising strophes of the *Realm* – Ruusbroec's first work – the mystic seems preoccupied with his new insights. Even though the preceding text gives no reason for it, he repeatedly stresses that 'earthly savour' (*eertsche smake*) and the yearning for 'praise and honour' (*lof ende eere*) seriously hamper mystical ascent.²⁰

All things considered, we are perfectly entitled to attribute the songs to Ruusbroec. When the two texts were last published as his work, the editors considered them youthful writings. There is much to be said for this hypothesis. Certainly in the first song, the poet – taking the tone of an infatuated youth – exults in the budding happiness of his experience of God. Ruusbroec wrote in the *Espousals* that such jubilation was granted to human beings 'at the beginning, when they turn away from the world, on the condition that they make a total conversion and give up all the consolation of the world'. He added that spiritual intoxication, once experienced, was no guarantee of enduring 'knowledge of the truth' (*kennisse der waerheit*) and – even worse – could be turned by conceit into 'false sweetness' (*valse soeticheit*). It seems that Ruusbroec had learned from experience. When he penned his songs, the mystic was so caught up in the change brought about by his introspection that he gave little thought to the side effects. 'Oh, what bliss it is to enjoy God!' (*Och, wat vrouden is gode gebruiken!*), rejoices the poet, and he praises those capable of sharing this higher truth. To which we must add, based on the Latin translation: 'It is difficult to discover their equals.'²¹

The Dutch version of the songs lacks these self-satisfied stanzas, as well as the autobiographical lines at the beginning. Have we stumbled across corrections made by the poet himself, who later found this ode to his spiritual conversion too exuberant? If so, it would provide us with further grounds for attributing the songs to Ruusbroec, for in his later prose texts he excelled in subordinating personal experience to general truths. Even so, this change in his tone of voice came about only gradually.

The editors of Ruusbroec's *Werken* did, however, include the Latin text of the songs (vol. IV, pp. LXI–LXIII and 284–85).

²⁰ Cf. *Realm* 1049–54, 1067–69 and 2054–56. See Szöverffy 1983, p. 555, with regard to the conventions of lyrical poetry (cf. Willaert 1984 and Reynaert 1994 on the mystical poetry of Hadewijch). For religious introspection in late-medieval conversion stories, see Kieckhefer 1998.

²¹ See *Espousals* b395–438; quotations b424–25 ('bi den beghinne also si hem vander werelt keeren, eest dat si enen gheheelen keer doen ende begheven alle troost der werelt') and b436. The quotations from the songs are taken from Lievens 1957a, pp. 122 and 120.

2. Lessons and Liturgy

Ruusbroec's first years in Brussels were spent largely within a triangle formed by the house of Jan Hinckaert, the Church of St Gudula and the chapter school, which was housed in a former granary. Lessons started at six in the morning and went on until four or five in the afternoon, with only an occasional break to allow the boys to participate as choristers in the celebration of the Divine Office. This strenuous schedule filled all seven days of the week.²²

Preparation for liturgical duties was an important part of the boys' education. The chapter schools were intended mainly to provide the personnel to carry out Church business. School and Divine Office were so closely related that the functions of Latin master and cantor (who supervised the performance of the music sung at Divine Office) could be fulfilled by one and the same person. In his treatise *On Seven Rungs*, Ruusbroec devised a sublime metaphor for a heavenly choir with Christ as 'our cantor and our headmaster' (*onse kantere ende onse overmeester*), who sings in exemplary fashion 'the tenor part and the cadences' (*tenuere ende slote*) with graceful 'ornamentation' (*floruere*) and a melodious 'descant' (*discant*). This passage, full of terms from the liturgical *ars musica*, is the earliest record of polyphonic choral music in Brussels, certainly if Ruusbroec was drawing on memories from his own schooldays, which seems to be the case here. Indeed, several pages earlier he portrays a humble man as an inquisitive pupil: 'a pupil of our Lord, always receiving from God the discipline of true peace'.²³

Discipline meant both edification and regimentation, for the schools were very strict indeed. The busy Latin master, who seldom had an assistant, was forced to rule with an iron hand. It is hardly surprising,

²² See in general Post 1954, Nauwelaerts 1980 and Van Buuren 1995 regarding medieval education at town and chapter schools in the Low Countries. See Valkestijn 1989, pp. 173–223, for the connection between school and choral singing. Regarding the school in Brussels, see Lamy 1924–25; Lefèvre 1942, pp. 210–42; De Ridder 1987–88, pp. 25–28.

²³ Quotations *Rungs* 820, 837, 874–78 and 677–78: 'scolier ons heeren, altoes ontfuende van gode discipline ghewareghs vreden'. See Baratz 1994, p. 217, on the roles of cantor and Latin master at the Chapter of St Gudula, which were separate functions in the fifteenth century, although at this time a manuscript (which had been donated to the chapter) containing the school text *Gnotosolitos* by the Groenendaal canon Arnoldus of Rotterdam was chained to the cantor's choir stall (Lefèvre 1932, De Backer 1987 regarding the text). Cf. De Ridder 1987–88, pp. 21–23. See Haggh 1994 about singing in church in medieval Brussels.

therefore, that medieval miniatures often portray teachers as cane-wielding keepers of order. Even Ruusbroec had vivid memories of the master's arsenal. Later on, in *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, he continued to link the symbolic meaning of *ferula* (the giant fennel plant) to obedience, because its stalks were used to make the rods 'with which they beat schoolboys' (*daer men die scoliere mede sleet*).²⁴

Admittedly, it cannot have been easy for teachers to preserve the peace, given the wide variety of pupils in their classes. The chapter school had originally been established to train choristers, but these choirboys found themselves in the company of middle-class youths, aspiring canons in need of further study and underage vicars choral such as Ruusbroec. There were no girls at his school, for the simple reason that women were not admitted to ecclesiastical office and were therefore excluded from advanced education.

This mixed bag of pupils – of various ages to boot – were served a curriculum consisting of three main ingredients: grammar, music and dialectics. Their musical education was dominated by the liturgy. Dialectics offered the most advanced pupils a brief look at Aristotelian logic, which had been taking root in European schools and universities since the twelfth century. The subject of grammar – which consisted of far more than merely reading, writing and speaking Latin correctly – took up the lion's share of the lessons. Building on an intensive course of language acquisition, one could expand the grammar lessons to include stylistics, composition, oratorical skill and related rhetorical disciplines.²⁵

It is impossible to paint a clearer picture of Ruusbroec's education, considering that the curriculum was entirely dependent on the person in charge. The teacher discussed material taken from a personally compiled textbook, which he provided with glosses and commentary as he saw fit. The curriculum could therefore vary greatly, depending on the teacher's religious affiliation, expertise and preferences. Thus the Antwerp magistrates' clerk Jan van Boendale – in *Der leken spiegel* (*The Layman's Mirror*), which he wrote around 1330 – seemed to ignore traditional views when following the authority of his master, naming theology as one of the seven liberal arts, even 'the most sacred and

²⁴ *Tabernacle* 5:4304. On *disciplina* at school, see Kintzinger 1996, pp. 2–3.

²⁵ See in general Van Buuren 1995, Post 1954, pp. 92–118 and Köhn 1986, pp. 231–42.

the best', because it explains scripture. As unexpected as Boendale's opinion may be for anyone familiar with the liberal arts, his remarks clearly evoke the hallowed sphere of a chapter school providing Bible study (for this, it seems, is what Boendale took 'theology' to be) at a level meriting its upgrade to the status of a liberal art.²⁶

The kind of education Ruusbroec received is also revealed by an ordinance decreed by Duke Jan III in 1320, which put an end to a dispute in Brussels concerning the city's schools. Dissatisfaction with the instruction offered at the chapter school had led several citizens to found their own schools, which were a thorn in the side of the Chapter of St Gudula. The duke recognised the exclusive right of the chapter to offer advanced education at the Latin school, but he also ordered the establishment of five new primary schools, where boys would be taught the rudiments of Latin, after which they would 'go to high school, to be taught grammar, music and ethics (*goeden seden*)'. Remarkably, ethics had taken the place of dialectics. This change in the curriculum no doubt reflected the wishes of the patriciate. The urban activities of trade and government were better served by young men with social skills and *goeden seden* (literally 'good manners') than by experts in logic or even theology.²⁷

Modern-day scholars discussing the level and organisation of medieval Latin schools often emphasise the profane element, which is justifiable only to a point. Even chapter schools, under pressure from the patriciate, could not avoid a certain degree of secularisation, but until well into the fifteenth century the Church continued to provide the institutional framework needed to train a literate clergy. Even after 1320, when the duke's decree led to differentiation in education, the Brussels chapter school remained a classic institution for the education of the clergy, an institution whose significance for Middle Dutch literature is only just beginning to emerge.²⁸

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²⁶ *Der leken spiegel*, book III, chapter 14, verses 73–108 (De Vries 1844–48). On Boendale and *Der leken spiegel*, see Kinable 1998 and Reynaert 2002.

²⁷ The ordinance is quoted from Van Buuren 1995, p. 222, where the Brussels problems are also treated.

²⁸ In the fifteenth century the logic of Petrus Hispanus was back in the Brussels curriculum (see Lefèvre 1942, p. 220). Cf. Köhn 1986, pp. 282–84, on the high level of education, whereas only basic writing skills were needed to be a merchant's clerk or secretary.

Like most of the pupils at the Latin school, Ruusbroec followed a four-year course of instruction, by the end of which the boys were steeped in the language of education and the Church. The world of learning lay open to them. Those harbouring scholarly ambitions still had a long way to go, following a path that led them through the faculties of the universities – a route that generally distanced them from literature written in the vernacular. This was the path taken by Ruusbroec's fellow townsman – and possibly fellow pupil – Jan van Brussel, who entered the order of the Cistercians at the Abbey of Villers, thirty kilometres south of Brussels, and in 1313 enrolled at the study house of his order at the Sorbonne, where he took the degree of Master in Theology before returning to Villers to assume the office of abbot. An extensive collection of Jan van Brussel's sermons in Latin has survived, but not one word in his mother tongue.²⁹

University graduates were very much in the minority among Middle Dutch authors, most of whom discontinued their schooling after their years at the chapter or town school. This level of education was generally not enough for them to make a serious contribution, as Jan van Brussel did, to Latin literature, but this did not relegate the Middle Dutch language and its literature to the sidelines of intellectual history. The wealth and depth of the Dutch literature stemming from Ruusbroec's century is certainly due to the authors' high level of education.

The texts known to have been part of the medieval school curriculum range widely over rhetoric, biblical history, general historiography, hagiography, biology, geography, astronomy, medicine, ethics, theology and spirituality – much of which had permeated Dutch literature at the turn of the fourteenth century through the works of Jacob van Maerlant, whom Jan van Boendale referred to as the 'father of Dutch literature altogether' (*vader der dietsche dichtren algader*). Around 1330 Boendale combined a large number of these subjects in *Der leken spiegel* (*The Layman's Mirror*), an encyclopaedic work in the form of a didactic poem. Other pedagogical writings in Middle Dutch opened up windows to the world of ethical and religious issues. Such reading matter was part of the self-fashioning activities of the laity rather than the school curriculum, although there, too, the Latin of the lessons must occasionally have been mixed with the vernacular. Or is it merely a coincidence that the oldest manuscript containing Middle Dutch biblical texts on

²⁹ On Jan van Brussel and his sermons, see Falmagne 1992 and 1993.

the life of Jesus is filled with glosses and notes that were clearly written by a teacher? The Latin source text of this so-called Harmony of the Gospels was a classic textbook used in religious education. Other Dutch translations of Latin religious texts may also have originated in the sphere of chapter and monastery school. In Ruusbroec's immediate circle, translations were made of Hugh of St Victor's *Soliloquium*, the *Manuale* (attributed to Augustine) and the *Meditationes piissimae de cognitione humanae condicionis* – all belonging to the standard corpus of devotional literature but also used for educational purposes. The thirteenth-century cantor (and possibly also Latin master) Simon van Tongeren owned a manuscript containing copies of these works and other school texts.³⁰

Middle Dutch literature and the curriculum of the chapter school overlapped in many areas, and this undoubtedly held true for Ruusbroec's oeuvre as well. He concluded his last work, *On the Twelve Beguines*, with an adaptation of the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels, and he had opened his debut, *The Realm of Lovers*, with a sketch of Creation, as was customary in medieval encyclopaedic literature. The Trinity, the heavenly spheres, the four elements, choirs of angels and human nature are examined in the fixed order of a genre that systematically described various aspects of the medieval world view, just as Jan van Boendale had done – in a much simpler way – in *Der leken spiegel*.³¹ Later on, Ruusbroec's imagery was frequently inspired by the natural sciences, encompassing everything from the animal kingdom to the cosmos and from the bodily humours (*humores*) to pathology. Because of Ruusbroec's interest in the *artes*, some of his texts were even included in a recent compendium of Middle Dutch literature on the seven liberal arts – even though his mystical philosophy of nature belongs much more to the sphere of literary symbolism than to the genre of such truly scholarly textbooks as the thirteenth-century *Natuurkunde van het geheelal* (*Natural*

³⁰ On translated school texts in general, see Henkel 1988 and Woods & Copeland 1999. For the background of the Latin didactic poem, see Haye 1997, pp. 111–28. With regard to the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels, see Warnar 1999b. See Van Oostrom 1996a, pp. 19–80, for a detailed study of Maerlant's schooling and its influence on his oeuvre. For *Der leken spiegel*, see De Vries 1844–48 (quotation Maerlant, book 3, chapter 15, verse 120). For translations, see De Vreese 1900–02, pp. 419–20 (Hugh of St Victor), Lub 1962 (*Manuale*) and Lievens 1995 (*Meditationes*). For the manuscript by Simon van Tongeren, see Staub & Knaus 1979, no. 172.

³¹ See Meier 1997, Meyer 2000 and Steer 1981 for the internationally authoritative works in this tradition: *De proprietatibus rerum* by Bartholomaeus Anglicus and the *Compendium theologiae veritatis* by Hugo Ripelin of Strasbourg. The latter text was certainly one of Ruusbroec's sources (Schepers 1999).

Science of the Universe). This rhyming Middle Dutch cosmography was in fact one of Ruusbroec's sources, but whereas Boendale sought in the *Natuurkunde* information to add to *Der leken spiegel*, the mystic found therein a metaphor comparing the changing moods in man's spiritual life with the unfolding of the four seasons.³²

The factual knowledge on which attention was focused in texts like *Der leken spiegel* played only a small role in Ruusbroec's transcendental world view. Boendale's encyclopaedia was a kind of general *ars vivendi* written for a public that had no need of profound reflections on the Holy Trinity or the religious psychology at the heart of Ruusbroec's work. School instruction did in fact delve deeply into the theological doctrine of the divine and the make-up of the human soul. This emerges from other instructional texts, such as the Latin *Elucidarium*, a dialogue between a master and a student (*clerc* in Middle Dutch), which begins with such questions as 'What is God?' and 'How should one envision the Trinity?' The Middle Dutch *Lucidarius*, however, discusses these matters only 'in so far as they can be explained to the laity', but this constraint did not apply to the original Latin text, which was taught at the chapter school.³³

There Ruusbroec received theological instruction at a rather high level, though characterised by a certain traditionalism. Prospective priests were not trained to take part in scholastic debate but rather to sing God's praises in the celebration of the Divine Office. Young clerics were instructed in the religious truths on which the liturgy was based. This somewhat conservative approach corresponded to the profile of Middle Dutch authors of Ruusbroec's day, who showed a deep interest in the mystery of the divine but were not specialised in theology as an academic discipline. Their religious ideas were nurtured more by the liturgy of the Church than by the scholasticism of the university. This

³² On Ruusbroec and the arts, see Jansen Sieben 1989, p. 73 and De Baere 1991. On Ruusbroec's allegorical interpretation of the cosmos, see Wackers 1989 and Vekeman 1981. For Ruusbroec's use of the *Natuurkunde* in the *Espousals* (and comparison with Boendale), see Warnar 1997a, pp. 144–45. Cf. *Natuurkunde* (see Jansen-Sieben 1968) verses 1045–50 and *Espousals* b363–66; *Natuurkunde* verses 1051–56 and *Espousals* b460–64; *Natuurkunde* verses 1063–76 and *Espousals* b528–33; *Natuurkunde* verses 1098–1104 and *Espousals* b673–78; *Natuurkunde* verses 1105–08 and *Espousals* b737–39. The *Natuurkunde* was not a school text in the strict sense, though it was used at school. See also the prologue (Jansen-Sieben 1968, verses 24–32) and Hays 1997, p. 130.

³³ Quotation *Lucidarius* (Blommaert 1856) verses 37–40: 'alsoe verre voit als den leeken lieden gheoorlooft is te bedieden'. See Sick 1995, pp. 105–09, on the teacher-pupil relationship in the (German) *Lucidarius*. For the original Latin text, see Gottschall 1992, pp. 1–48 (see p. 35 regarding use at school).

is demonstrated by Maerlant in his strophic *Vander drievoudichede* (*On the Trinity*), when he clarifies the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in verses patterned after church hymns rather than Petrus Lombardus's *Sententia*, the handbook of academic theology, whose chapters on the Trinity must have been studied intensively by Jan van Brussel during his university years in Paris.³⁴

Ruusbroec had more in common with Maerlant. Having been trained in the same sphere of religious schooling and Divine Office, Ruusbroec produced in his first work – in resourcefully sustained parallel sentences betraying almost no hint of hesitation – an ode to the ‘groundless Godhead’ (*grondeloser godheyt*) of which this quotation comprises only one-third:

He is a beauty that enriches the realms of heaven and earth. He is a richness out of which all creatures have flowed and in which they have essentially remained. He is an honour to the realms of heaven and earth and all creatures. He is a life in which everything lives that ever was and ever shall be. He is a victory in which one conquers all things. He is the crown with which the victors will be crowned. He is health: whosoever attains Him will henceforth be cured. He is peace in which all lovers rest. He is security: whosoever obtains Him wants for nothing. He is the blessedness that gives enjoyment. He is a consolation that gladdens the sorrowful. He is the sweetness that permeates those who desire. He is joy: those who love exult in Him. He is the source of joy; those who take pleasure melt away in Him. And He is jubilation, that is, a joy inexpressible in words, in which all senses and faculties fail.³⁵

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³⁴ For *Vander drievoudichede*, see Verdam & Leendertsz 1918, pp. 61–85, with identification of the sources in the commentary (pp. 182–95); cf. Warnar 2000a, p. 700. See also Warnar 2002a and Galloway 1992 in general about the intellectual profile of comparable medieval authors writing in the vernacular. On Lombardus and his *Sententia*, see Colish 1994, esp. pp. 227–302, regarding the image of God in theology.

³⁵ *Realm* 2269–82: ‘Ende hi es ene scoenheit die ciert hemelrike ende eertrike. Ende hi es een rijcdom daer alle creatueren uut ghevloeten sijn ende weseleec in bleven sijn. Ende hi es .i. eersamheit hemelrikes ende eertrijcs ende alre creatueren. Ende hi es .i. leven daer al dat in leeft dat ye ghewart ende emmermeer sijn sal. Ende hi es seghe daer men alle dinc in verwint. Ende hi es decrone daer die verwinnende mede ghecroent werden. Ende hi es ghesonde; die hem vercrighet, hi es vorweert meer ghenesen. Ende hi es vrede daer alle minnende in rasten. Ende hi es sekerheit; die hem vercrighet, hem en mach niet ghebreken. Ende hi es die salicheit, die ghevet dat ghebruken. Ende hi es .i. troest die verblijdet de bedroefde. Ende hi es soeticheit die doergheet die begheerende. Ende hi es vroude; in hem ghelorieren de minnende. Ende hi es oerspronc der vrouwen; in hem versmelten die ghebrukende. Ende hi es een jubel; dat es eene vroude diemen niet ghewaerden en mach, daer in falieren sinne ende crachte.’

Anyone searching Ruusbroec's texts for traces of his schooldays would do better to heed the preceding quotation than to chuckle at his remark about the master's rod. More so than discipline, method or material, it was literary awareness that Ruusbroec retained from his years in the old granary. Schooled in rhetoric and receptive to things religious, he developed, slowly but surely, a feeling for the right balance between wordcraft and religious experience, which lent his mystical language an expressiveness all its own. Through his Latin master, Ruusbroec became acquainted with literary techniques relating to genre, structure and style. He studied Ovid, Virgil and other classical writers to become proficient in the arts and conventions of language – in this case Latin – as a means of literary expression.

The rhetorical legacy of antiquity could be taught without difficulty in the religious environment of monastic and chapter schools. After centuries of adaptation, selection and mystification, the antique tradition had been so profoundly Christianised that Jacob van Maerlant could assume on good authority that Seneca had been baptised by the Apostle Paul. However, in spite of this antique-profane element in education, Ruusbroec lived from his earliest schooldays in a world pervaded by the language of the Bible. He probably learned his first Latin by studying the Psalms while still at the parish school in his native village, but at the chapter school in Brussels he no doubt studied every detail of this biblical book, the verses of which occur in every part of the Divine Office.

The Psalms offered, moreover, models for hymns, prayers and other devotional texts which had a great impact on Dutch vernacular authors, even those less sensitive than Ruusbroec. The sources of Maerlant's *Strofische gedichten* (*Strophic Poems*) lie in the same sphere of hymns that inspired Hadewijch. In imitation of this great beguine and poetess, a stream of religious verse flowed forth in Middle Dutch that did not fail to touch Ruusbroec. His previously discussed strophic songs, as well as the rhymed passages in his prose tracts, display an affinity with this mystical poetry.³⁶

Writing in verse, however, quickly became a matter of secondary importance for Ruusbroec. Through study, practice and experimentation,

³⁶ On the influence and use of biblical and devotional texts, see Alford 1973, Pranger 1995, Gehl 1984 and Riché 1985, pp. 135–37. See Van Oostrom 1996a, pp. 75–84, on Maerlant's sources for the *Strofische gedichten* and Warnar 2000a, p. 700 and n. 68, on mystical poetry from Ruusbroec's circle.

he explored literary language and the effect of stylistic techniques. *The Realm of Lovers* and *On the Twelve Beguines*, two treatises which for various reasons may be described as works in progress, act as showcases of style and genre: treatise, sermon, allegory, exegesis, (rhyming) dialogue, prayer, instruction, meditation – and all of it firmly rooted in scripture.

Biblical *imitatio* must have become second nature to Ruusbroec while still at school. God's word had given Christian thought a vocabulary and a form in a rich literary tradition with which Ruusbroec became thoroughly familiar in a daily school routine that alternated between lessons and liturgy. Both biblical study and Divine Office contributed to Ruusbroec's religious literacy. He consciously modelled his exalted prose on God's word, using biblical imagery, references to scripture and ingenious exegesis. A systematic study of Ruusbroec and the Bible – a task calling for an expert – would fill a sizeable volume. Here, by way of illustration, are a number of excerpts from the easily recognisable adaptation of the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels appearing in the *Beguines*. This work stems from the latter years of Ruusbroec's writing career, but his treatment of what is obviously a school text is especially illuminating in the context of this chapter. While still at school, Ruusbroec could have practised the rhetorical technique he learned as *amplificatio* (elaboration) on this type of text. Every detail of the Passion story is broadly treated in the *Beguines*, and even the simple statement that Jesus prayed at length in the garden of Gethsemane is given a deeper meaning:

His [Jesus'] spirit was lifted up above all, empty and free, blessed and united to God in love. His rational soul was full of grace, wise and clear, inner and devout, desiring and praying for those for whom he would die. But all His sensibility was in fear and apprehension and full of images of suffering and bitter death. This is why he prayed at length.

Here Ruusbroec was not merely putting a literary technique into practice. By elaborating upon the differences between emotion and strength of mind, he enriched the biblical text as material for meditation, dwelling exclusively on personal experience and empathy. This spiritual reading of Holy Scripture, or *lectio divina*, was an age-old tradition in contemplative monastic culture, but as a rhetorical technique it had made its way by Ruusbroec's time into the curriculum taught at such religious institutions as collegiate churches, where liturgy was the focal point and pupils were instructed in the language of the Bible.³⁷

³⁷ *Beguines* 2c, pp. 61–66: 'Sijn [Jesus'] gheest was boven al verhaven, leedich ende

Ruusbroec's account of the Passion was clearly shaped by the combined influence of school and Divine Office. Adhering to a widely known meditational framework, he divided the Passion among the seven canonical hours, just as Jan van Boendale had done in *Der leken spiegel*. As though stressing the differences between their versions, Ruusbroec refined the customary division into canonical hours by having the individual events of the Passion correspond to the smaller units of the nocturnes from the breviary – the book from which priests recited the Divine Office. Ruusbroec expressly forged a link with the Divine Office by first citing a version of the verse from Psalm 51 with which the Hours begin:

Lord, open my heart and my mouth, I shall proclaim Thy praise and Thy glory. Lord, look upon me and make haste to help me, that I may accomplish Thy praise and Thy service. Lord, Thou hast beheld me in eternity, called and chosen [me], [thou hast been] well disposed [towards me] and loved [me], provided I believe in Thee and wish freely to serve Thee until death. For Thou hast created us after Thine image, that is to be one with Thee in love. And Thou hast created us in Thine own likeness, that we, by Thy grace, might be like Thee in all ways of virtue. And Thou hast abased Thyself beneath all and elevated us above all that Thou hast created. And Thou hast loved us so greatly that Thou hast visited us in this exile. Thou hast taken our humanity and put it on. Thou wast born at night of the Virgin Mary and laid in a manger, small and humble between two beasts. Thou hast enriched the night by Thy birth. The angels sang Thy praise: people of good will who live for Thee, possess in Thee eternal peace. Here we begin the first nocturne or hour of our Matins, in remembrance of the Passion of our Lord.³⁸

los, salich ende gode gheenicht in minne. Sijn redelijcke ziele was vol genaden, wijs ende claer, innich ende devoet, begherende ende biddende vore die ghene daer hy om sterven soude. Maer al sijn ghevoelen was in anxste ende in vreesen ende overbeelt metter passien ende metter bitter doot. Ende hier omme beedde hy langhe.' See Kors 1998, with another example on p. 62. For *lectio divina*, see Leclercq 1982.

³⁸ *Beguines* 2c/5–20: “Heere doet op mijne herte ende mijnen mont, ic sal condighen dynen lof ende dyne eere. Heere, siet my ane ende haest my te hulpen, op dat ic uwen lof ende uwen dienst volbringhen moghe. Heere ghy hebt my inder eewicheit ane ghesien, gheroepen ende vercoren, ghemeint ende ghemint, eest dat ic in u ghelove ende vryenlic dienen wille al tot der doot. Want ghy hebt ons ghescapen tot uwen beelde, dat es een te sine met u in minnen. Ende ghi hebt ons ghescapen te uwen ghelijcke, dat wij overmids uwe gracie u ghelijcken moghen in allen wijsen van duechden. Ende ghy hebt u ghenedert onder al ende ons ghehoocht boven al dat ghy ghescapen hebt. Ende ghy hebt ons soe seere ghemindt, dat ghy ons hebt ghevisiteert in dese elinde. Ende ghy hebt onse menscheit aen ghenomen ende aen ghedaen. Ghy wort gheboren inder nacht van der maghet Marien ende in eene crebbe gheleecht, cleyne ende oetmoedich tusschen II beesten. Ghi hebt den nacht ghechiert met uwer ghebornen. Die inghele songhen u lof: Die goetwillighe menschen die u leven, besitten in u eewigen vrede.” Hier beghinnen wy die eerste noctuerne ofte ure van onser mettenen, in een

This passage is a wonderful example of Ruusbroec's use of biblical language and rhetorical tropes as both the fuel and the vehicle to stimulate meditation. Ruusbroec combined the characteristics of the Psalms as the medieval model for prayer with the gospels' redemptive history of suffering and salvation. For those who understand the allusions, this introduction alone harbours a wealth of meaning. The prayer is a rhetorically constructed *figura* – literally a 'figure of speech' – based on the first Latin words that Ruusbroec had ever murmured in the Divine Office, the reciting of which marked the beginning of a pupil's long path to literacy.³⁹

As far as Ruusbroec's later life is concerned, the most important facet of his schooldays was undoubtedly this intimate acquaintance with the Divine Office. As a chorister and vicar choral, he could let his pious spirit mature in the sacred sphere of the liturgy, the extraordinary effects of which were elucidated in countless stories. An *exemplum* made the rounds, for example, about a devout but intellectually limited youth to whom all the secrets of Holy Writ – in the guise of a magnificent palace – were suddenly revealed during the Divine Office. But when he opened his eyes he could not remember anything.⁴⁰

Whether Ruusbroec was ever that deeply touched by the liturgical setting is not part of recorded history, but in the *Realm* he already reveals his lifelong susceptibility to the age-old ceremonials of the Divine Office that provided the longing for God with a formal framework. Many years later – while writing *On Seven Rungs* – Ruusbroec was still fascinated by the liturgy. More than half of this relatively short work treats the importance of 'desiring the honour of God above all things' (*begheeren de eere gods boven alle ding*) and of 'giving God praise and honour according to His worthiness' (*gode lof ende eere gheven na dat hi weerdegh es*). Ruusbroec sees the fulfilment of this desire in three 'modes of practice' (*wisen van ufeninghen*). Each mode consists of three elements that reflect all the stages of the striving towards God in divine worship: praying, worshipping and loving; desiring, beseeching and longing; thanking, praising and glorifying. That Ruusbroec's respect for the liturgy can be traced to his schooldays emerges a few pages later, where the author

ghedincken der passien ons heeren.' See Kors 1998, p. 61 ff., on the division of the Passion and Divine Office. For a broader context, see Stadlhuber 1950.

³⁹ See also *Beguines* 2b/2648–52. On rhetoric and meditation, see Carruthers 1998, pp. 122–24.

⁴⁰ Stutvoet-Joanknecht 1990, pp. 187–88.

again sees himself as a chorister and uses the metaphor of Christ as cantor and headmaster.⁴¹

3. Years of Silence

Around 1310 Ruusbroec left the chapter school for good, but many years would pass before the young cleric emerged as the great master of *The Spiritual Espousals*. This text is customarily dated to 1330 or after. Before the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec wrote *The Realm of Lovers*, which he initially refused to put into circulation.

We have no concrete information about Ruusbroec's life from the time he left school until he wrote the *Espousals* – his actual debut – apart from his ordination in 1318 and an agreement made with Jan Hinckaert in 1327, whereby the mystic came to own one-eighth of a mill (the Kerkhofmolen) at Schaarbeek, north of Brussels. The management of this property, however, certainly occupied Ruusbroec less than his own spiritual enrichment. If Pomerius is to be believed, solitude and self-discipline were the precepts governing Ruusbroec's life. With no concern for outward appearances, he led a solitary life because he found that it furthered his spiritual development. The introspective mystic provoked mixed reactions. When Ruusbroec walked the streets of Brussels 'inwardly exalted in spirit' (*verhaven van bynnen inden gheest*), some passers-by would stare at him in admiration, while others, glad not to be in his shoes, shook their heads in disapproval, which prompted Ruusbroec to think to himself: 'Oh, how little you have tasted of the sweetness savoured by those who have tasted of the Holy Spirit.' Pomerius was probably tempted to use this interior monologue because of its dramatic effect, but the words – even if apocryphal – are very apt indeed. Ruusbroec seems to have had the same critical observers in mind when writing about rude people (*rudes*) in his songs: 'If I were to reveal my jubilation to them, they would rob me of my honour. The most sensible thing to do is to tolerate this for the time being, for I know I am eternally above time and this fills my heart with extraordinary joy.'⁴²

⁴¹ See *Realm* 1088–93 and *Rungs* 314–15 and 387. Cf. also Noë 2001, pp. 77–146, with regard to the feudalism metaphor in the *Realm*. A substantial part of the imagery discussed there shows a resemblance to liturgical terminology.

⁴² On the dating and chronology of Ruusbroec's works, see Warnar 1994; see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 15, regarding the mill (Kerkhofmolen). See Verdeyen 1981b,

Ruusbroec felt compelled to turn away from the world. In his last work, *On the Twelve Beguines*, he was still advising those ‘who in their youth promise purity to God, whether inside or outside an order’, to seek solace in fasting, praying and keeping vigil, to ‘be eager to read and hear the word of God and be alone at all times, and neither seek nor desire lust or pleasure in God or in creatures’.⁴³ Applied to Ruusbroec’s own life, these words go some way towards explaining the years of silence preceding the *Espousals*. Ruusbroec sought the spiritual solitude necessary for complete absorption in his lofty reflections, until he was able to write, on the basis of his own experience and meditation, about contact with the ‘eternal essence’ (*ewich wesen*), which took place far beyond the senses. The songs, however, were not Ruusbroec’s definitive mode of expression for his mystical wisdom. The adventure of experiencing God, which he had applauded in the songs as a source of perfect joy, was discussed in the *Espousals* with a well-developed feeling for the composition of scholastic texts and a thorough knowledge of profound theological ideas. Short outbursts of verse still feature in the *Realm*, but slowly the poet gave way to the thinker. En route to the *Espousals* Ruusbroec resolved to pour his mystical inspiration into the intellectual mould of the treatise.

At first glance Ruusbroec seems simply to have followed contemporary trends in literature. Learned brothers in the mendicant orders were embroiled in a lively debate on the metaphysics of mysticism, and their ideas found their way into the vernacular through written sermons and tracts. Close examination of the *Espousals* reveals just how surprising its theological content really is, especially if we recall that Ruusbroec’s training as a chaplain made him an intellectual lightweight compared with the well-schooled Dominicans who set the tone in contemporary mystical theology. A well-known name in Ruusbroec’s milieu was Hendrik of Leuven, who around 1300 was serving as prior of the Dominicans in his native city. This former lector at the prestigious *studium generale* of the Dominicans at Cologne certainly surpassed Ruusbroec in erudition and expertise, but as an author of Middle Dutch prose Hendrik

p. 138 (De Leu 1885, pp. 285–86) for the comments of passers-by: ‘Ach mensche, hoe luttel hebstu ghesmaect der sueticheit die die gene gevoelen die ghesmaect hebben des heiligen gheestes.’ For the poems, see Lievens 1957a, pp. 120–22.

⁴³ Quotation *Beguines* 2b/1681–85: ‘gherne lesen ende hooren dat wort gods ende alle tijt gherne alleene sijn; ende in gode noch in creatueren ghelost noch ghenuechte sueken noch begheren’.

of Leuven – whose only writings in the vernacular consist of a single sermon and a letter to a female confessee – could not hold a candle to the chaplain.⁴⁴

That Ruusbroec's writings outshone those of an academically trained Dominican was no doubt seen as proof that he was one of God's elect, but we cannot attribute the grandeur of the *Espousals* to divine grace alone. Despite Pomerius's assertion that Ruusbroec chose to study at the school of divine wisdom after gaining only 'vanity and pride' in formal education, the author of the *Espousals* must nevertheless have acquired a good deal more book-learning. An enthusiastic Latin master at the chapter school could have acquainted Ruusbroec with the fundamentals of theology, but his works betray a knowledge more profound than that normally acquired in the course of a cleric's training.⁴⁵

After his years at school, Ruusbroec must have continued to study theology, but this is all that can be said with certainty about this crucial formative phase in his writing career. The sources relating to his life give no indication whatsoever of further study or advanced education. Jan van Schoonhoven's refutation of Gerson's charges did not give the impression that Ruusbroec's education had provided him with anything more than the knowledge needed by an ordained priest (*sacerdos*). Pomerius also leaves us in the dark on this score, though he does explain why we are so inadequately informed about the mystic's intellectual background: it was simply not a subject worth pursuing. In Pomerius's opinion, all acquired knowledge was of far less importance than 'the dew of divine grace' with which Ruusbroec had been liberally sprinkled while still struggling with the rudiments of grammar. His spirit rose effortlessly above 'the common practice of logic'. This did not happen 'through any acquired science or information obtained from people, but more by means of divine revelation, as may be seen in his books' (*niet met eniger vercregenre sciencien of bi informacien van enighen mensche, mer meer mids godliker revelacien, alsoet in sinen boeken is te merken*).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ On Hendrik of Leuven, see Axters 1947. Other examples of early Middle Dutch mystical prose are to be found in De Vooy's 1921, Lievens 1960c, Reynaert 1978, Kwakkel & Mulder 2001, Scheepsma 2001 and Warnar 2002b. On the Dominicans in general, cf. Schiewer 2000a, pp. 874–85 and Largier 1995. See Marrone 2001 for an overview of the thirteenth-century theology of the knowledge of God.

⁴⁵ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 126 (De Leu 1885, p. 272).

⁴⁶ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 137 (De Leu 1885, p. 284). See Ampe 1975a, pp. 127–28, on Schoonhoven's idea of Ruusbroec's erudition.

Pomerius would have done better to omit the last part of that sentence. On every page of Ruusbroec's oeuvre we find proof of his intense involvement with science and learning. It could hardly have been otherwise, since writing about the experience of God had become a scholarly affair in the fourteenth century. Franciscan theologians composed wide-ranging treatises on the forms of mystical unity and the proper way to gain an understanding of it. The Dominicans affiliated with the *studium generale* of their order in Cologne showed off their knowledge in profound discussions of the supremacy of the intellect in unveiling the divine mystery. Written in the Low German of Cologne, their texts spread quickly and easily to the Dutch-speaking regions. Ruusbroec made a thorough study of these extremely philosophical theories of the divine as a concept beyond human understanding. Striving upward towards the Supreme Being, the human mind must stop thinking in terms of frameworks, concepts and categories, in order to attain a state of complete emptiness:

...with respect to being lost in the darkness of the wilderness, nothing is left over, for there is no giving or taking there, only a simple, one-fold essence. In it, God and all those united with Him are sunken and lost, and they can never again find themselves in this modeless essence, for it is a pure, simple one-foldness, and this is the highest blessedness in the realm of God.⁴⁷

These are breathtakingly complex notions, expressed in a seemingly abstruse language which even in Ruusbroec's day deviated markedly from generally comprehensible Dutch. Needless to say, this seriously hampers a modern translation. The above-quoted lines from the *Realm* were Ruusbroec's first attempt to describe the black hole of the Godhead. Over the years he developed an extensive vocabulary for the metaphysical wilderness in which man feels a oneness with 'God in His simple essence without work, eternal inactivity, modeless darkness, unnamed is-ness, the superessence of all creatures' (*God in sinen sempelen wesene sonder werc, eeweghe ledecheit, wiseloese deemsterheit, onghenaemde*

⁴⁷ *Realm* 2379–84: 'nader verloerenheit in der woestinen deemsterheit, daer en blivet niet over; want daer en is gheven noch nemen, maer een sempel eenvuldich wesen. Daer es god ende alle de verenichde in versonken ende verloren, ende nummermeer en moghense hen vinden in desen wiseloesen wesene, want het es ene puere sempele eenvuldicheit, ende dat es in den rike gods die hoechste salicheyt'. On the contribution of the Dominicans and Franciscans to medieval mysticism, see McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 70–112 and Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 406–45 and vol. III. See Warnar 2002b for the dissemination of Dominican texts in Middle Dutch.

istegheit, alre creatueren overwesen). These expressions were far removed from tangible reality or the imagery common in everyday language; these were concepts stemming from theoretical (or speculative) theology – *istegheit*, for instance, being a neologism coined by Meister Eckhart. Admittedly, Ruusbroec did not use these notions, which bore the stamp of scholarly Latin, with the academic attention to minutiae of the true theologian, but his unwavering perception of exceptionally complicated issues should dispel once and for all the idea that the philosophical arts were wasted on him.⁴⁸

The source of the notion of God as an ‘unknowing’ (*niet weten*), an abyss of ‘namelessness’ (*ongenaemtheit*) or an ‘unfathomable unknowing’ (*onwetenne sonder gront*) – to quote again from each of Ruusbroec’s first three works – lies in a fifth-century oeuvre which until the nineteenth century was attributed to an Athenian pupil of the Apostle Paul: Dionysius the Aereopagite. His presumed authorship lent these originally Greek writings a well-nigh biblical authority in medieval theology. Consequently, there was fierce theorising in Ruusbroec’s day about the notions of (Pseudo-)Dionysius and his image of God as an entity that surpassed all categories of conceptualisation. Latin translations of his work were supplied with commentaries by many of the best thinkers of the Middle Ages. The well-informed reference work *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* contained 185 columns on Dionysius and his works, of which no fewer than 161 were taken up by an overview of the influence he continued to exert. Here, in the midst of such great figures as Dante, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, Ruusbroec was also given a place among the many descendants of this patriarch of Christian mysticism.⁴⁹

It was not the first time that Ruusbroec had joined the ranks of an elite corps of spiritual writers. In *De origine* Pomerius pointed out that Gerson had counted Ruusbroec among the ‘teachers who had written about the high contemplation of the Godhead’. Pomerius wisely kept silent about Gerson’s note of warning concerning the suspect third part of the *Espousals*; the important thing was that the chancellor had

⁴⁸ *Rungs* 1158–61. See Axters 1937 on the development of a scholastic Middle Dutch (for Ruusbroec, see pp. 35*–40*). On Ruusbroec’s use of theological and philosophical terminology, see Alaerts 1975a and b.

⁴⁹ Quotations from *Realm* 2731, *Espousals* c242 and *Stone* 622, respectively. A good impression of Dionysius at the beginning of the history of medieval mysticism is given in Ruh 1990–99, vol. I, pp. 31–81 and DS III, cols. 244–429 on Dionysius; cols. 286–429 on his reception in East and West; cols. 361–65 on Ruusbroec and Dionysius.

indeed included the work in his inventarisation of the mystical patrimony. Gerson saw Dionysius as the leader of the *fine fleur* of spiritual world literature, in which Augustine, Richard of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux were until the thirteenth century the other key figures. Then, according to Gerson, mystical tradition reached a new peak with the works of Bonaventure. Proceeding to his own time, the chancellor singled out several other noteworthy followers, assigning Ruusbroec and his *Espousals* a place among Franciscan monastic scholars writing in Latin, such as Bertram of Ahlen and Rudolf of Biberach, both active in the first decades of the fourteenth century. The former wrote a treatise full of quotations from Dionysius, variations on his thinking and quotations from the work of others. Rudolf of Biberach, drawing on an especially wide-ranging set of sources, composed *De septem itineribus aeternitatis*, a widely disseminated handbook of mystical theology.⁵⁰

Ahlen and Biberach were accomplished monastic scholars who took full part in the intellectual life of their orders, but both have meanwhile been relegated to the footnotes in the history of mysticism, whereas Ruusbroec has grown to monumental stature. Times change. The *Espousals* would probably never have attracted Gerson's attention were it not for the Latin translation, but we may nevertheless conclude that Ruusbroec was more at home among the masters of fourteenth-century mysticism than in Pomerius's spiritual isolation of divine revelation.

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A specialist in theology, the chancellor Gerson could be trusted to identify continuity in the mystical tradition, though on a rather abstract level. However, the historical perspective of this study into Ruusbroec's authorship prompts one to consider where he acquired enough knowledge to vie with such scholars as Biberach and Ahlen, both of whom – as lecturers in Strasbourg and Münster, respectively – instructed their fellow friars in theology. The lectorate, an important function in mendicant convents, was open only to those with a university education. Ruusbroec's training at the chapter school pales in comparison, but

⁵⁰ The *Annotatio doctorum aliquorum qui de contemplatione locuti sunt* is edited in Combes 1945–72, pp. 652–64; for the dating, see p. 329. Regarding the text in connection with Ruusbroec, see Warnar 2000a, pp. 685–86; in connection with Ahlen and Biberach, see pp. 697–98. On Ahlen, see also Bihl 1947 and, more recently, Beccarisi 2004, with editions of his works. On Biberach, see Schmidt 1985a and b. Cf. Roest 2000, pp. 255–56.

scholars have never made a point of this gap in his education. The theological foundations of Ruusbroec's teachings consisted in a 'personally compiled course of wide reading'. The casual dismissal of this matter can be explained only by the high degree of erudition among Ruusbroec researchers. Nevertheless, a self-taught author of the *Espousals* is an anachronism pure and simple.

In this context it has often been pointed out that Ruusbroec, being affiliated with the Church of St Gudula, had access to the chapter library. We know nothing about this library except that it was located on the north side of the church. Information on its collection of books is available only from fifteenth-century sources, namely the wills of several canons, which do not suggest that the chapter library was a mine of mystical theology. In accordance with the general picture of the secular clergy, the canons' professional interest focused on judicial texts. There were exceptions, however. The Antwerp canon and Master of Arts Hendrik Nose owned (at the end of the thirteenth century) a twelve-volume glossed Bible, handbooks for sermons and the *Breviloquium*, a theological compendium by Bonaventure. He donated the books to the local Dominicans on the condition that the chapter priests and chaplains be allowed to borrow them for the purpose of study.⁵¹

Books were probably not lacking in Brussels either, but that does not tell the whole story. Assuming Ruusbroec did have the opportunity to immerse himself in the theological texts of a well-stocked chapter library, he would have had to be familiar with the methods and techniques of scholarly literature to make real progress in his private studies. It has therefore been suggested that Ruusbroec, after completing the four-year course at the chapter school, continued his education at either the University of Paris or the famous *studium generale* of the Dominicans at Cologne. The latter possibility is the less likely of the two – attractive as the idea might be that Ruusbroec was a member of Meister Eckhart's audience in Cologne. Studying at the Dominicans' highest educational institution was a privilege reserved for the most promising friars, who after lengthy preparatory training were subjected to a

⁵¹ On the library of St Gudula's and the canons' collection of books, see Lefèvre 1942, pp. 241–44. A systematic overview of information on the books owned by Brussels clerics, as described in contemporary catalogues, is to be found in Derolez 1966–2001, vol. IV, pp. 43–151. See in general De Keyser 1974. For Nose, see Warnar 2002a, p. 37, with literature.

strict selection procedure. Pupils leaving the chapter school did better to head for the university.⁵²

Ruusbroec certainly had enough knowledge of Latin to try his luck in Paris. He would not have been the first Brussels cleric to do so: by the beginning of the fourteenth century the city had its own confraternity of *clerici parisienses*. There is not much more to suggest that Ruusbroec attended university, even though the mystic could probably vie with many a former student in ready knowledge of theology. In recent scholarship there is mounting support for the notion that the intellectual unfolding of Middle Dutch literature around 1300 may be explained by stronger ties to university circles, but this does not imply that the authors in question proceeded *en masse* to the lecture halls. Many lines ran from Paris – in Ruusbroec’s day the pre-eminent centre of learning in general and theology in particular – to networks outside the academic world. The most notable intermediaries were the mendicants, who were taught by university-trained lectors in preparation for their prime task of preaching God’s word.⁵³

Searching for the intellectual background of Ruusbroec’s works, we must therefore focus first and foremost on the Brussels convents of Carmelites and Franciscans. These were the local centres of the theological training by which the mendicant orders distinguished themselves as professional preachers’ guilds. Ruusbroec demonstrates commensurate expertise from the very first sentence of his written oeuvre. *The Realm of Lovers* begins according to the principles of the thematic sermon. Ruusbroec divides a biblical text into five sections, bestowing the individual sections with deeper meanings that will be the subject of his argument. If this were an incidental *introductio thematis*, one might suppose that Ruusbroec had stumbled accidentally on a model sermon while leafing through the books in the chapter library or listening to the friars who preached at set times at the Church of St Gudula. The *Realm*, however, displays a complex system of divisions and subdivisions

⁵² Suggestions that Ruusbroec studied with the Dominicans or at university appear in Kalf 1906, p. 391; Stracke 1931, p. 77; Lefèvre 1933, p. 390; cf. Ampe 1975a, p. 545. There is a detailed treatment of the Dominican curriculum in Mulchahey 1998; cf. Gnädinger 1993, pp. 18–22, in connection with the German mystic Johannes Tauler.

⁵³ On the Brussels *clerici parisienses*, see Lefèvre 1939, p. 63 and Lefèvre 1942, p. 103. Cf. in general Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 23–41, and with regard to Ruusbroec pp. 261–77. See Warnar 2000a, pp. 696–97, concerning mendicant convents as intellectual centres.

based on the rules of the medieval *artes praedicandi*. The highly praised structure of the *Espousals* betrays equally great exegetical adeptness; moreover, Ruusbroec's longest work, *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, was the first biblical commentary written in the Dutch language.⁵⁴

The most significant indication of the nature of Ruusbroec's expertise is to be found in the opening of the *Tabernacle*, which begins with an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:24: 'So run, that ye may obtain' (*'Loept alsoe dat ghi begripen moegt'*). Following the *artes praedicandi*, Ruusbroec divides the biblical passage into three parts: the running itself (run/*loept*), the way in which it is done (*so/alsoe*) and the object of running (*begripen* in the sense of 'grasping', both literally and figuratively). The Franciscan Petrus de San Benedicto had explained the same aspects of this passage as *actus*, *modus* and *fructus* in a sermon he gave in Latin around 1280 at the University of Paris.⁵⁵

Ruusbroec did not necessarily have a copy of this sermon at his disposal. He could also have come across the interpretative model of this scriptural passage in a glossed Bible or in the numerous concordances and examples from which preachers drew their material. Such books were available in the libraries of the mendicant orders, so that travelling friars could increase their knowledge and hone their preaching skills at their various stopping places. Interested outsiders like Ruusbroec must have been permitted to peruse these books, but in his case this was not confined to sporadic consultation. Judging by the expertise he brought to bear on his subject matter, Ruusbroec was as familiar with Franciscan theology as the now forgotten Petrus de San Benedicto. Apart from similarities in treatment and technique, Ruusbroec's writings have much in common with the mystical theology of the Friars Minor. Their greatest authority, Bonaventure, had written masterpieces – the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and *De triplici via* – on the contemplation of God. In the *Espousals* in particular, Ruusbroec aimed at creating a

⁵⁴ On mendicant preachers in Brussels, see Verjans 1952. For the composition of the *Realm*, see Willaert 1993b, pp. 66–71. To get some idea of Ruusbroec's technical skill, compare the tight structure and development of the *Realm* with the much more loosely composed sermon 11 from the *Limburgse sermoenen* of c. 1300 on the same biblical theme (Kern 1895, pp. 278–98). For other examples of Ruusbroec's preaching techniques, see Warnar 1997a, p. 143 and Willaert 1995, pp. 57–58. For general information on the mendicants as well-schooled preachers and the rise of advanced preaching techniques, see d'Avray 1985 and Köhn 1986, p. 281. On the Middle Dutch sermon, see Zielemans 1978.

⁵⁵ *Tabernacle* 0:1–8. On Petrus, see Bataillon 1986, pp. 565–68; for the sermon mentioned here, see Schneyer 1972, p. 785, no. 34.

Dutch counterpart to these magisterial syntheses of devotion, erudition and literature.⁵⁶

All things considered, it was only natural that Ruusbroec should draw inspiration from these sources, since he could have become acquainted with Franciscan mysticism only a stone's throw from Jan Hinckaert's house. As early as 1238, the Friars Minor had settled in Brussels, near the Grand Place. Though it might not seem so from the recently unearthed foundations, in Ruusbroec's day their convent was the second most important religious institution in the city, after the Collegiate Church of St Gudula, and as a centre of learning it was rivalled in Brussels only by the convent of the Carmelites. In 1329 the Carmelites had appointed two lectors in theology, the brothers Matthias of Cologne and Johannes Guldenaere, both of whom had obtained their doctorates in divinity in Paris. From 1320 until around 1350 they alternated as prior and lector at the Carmelite convent in Brussels. Perhaps Ruusbroec found a kindred spirit in Guldenaere, who was known by his fellow students as a man with a talent for self-denial and a love of Divine Office. The collections of sermons compiled by this Carmelite are now lost, but they would have been a major source of information for the spiritual sphere Ruusbroec inhabited. Guldenaere was too young, however, to have been the mystic's teacher. The only identifiable candidate is a man called Henricus, who served the Brussels Friars Minor as lector around 1315.⁵⁷

Although Henricus's prime responsibility was the friars' training, clerics unaffiliated with the convent were welcome to attend his lessons. Thus it is conceivable that Ruusbroec was present as an auditor at a Franciscan course of Bible study aimed at the acquisition of preaching skills (such as those used in the *Realm* and the *Espousals*) and generally relying on exegetical textbooks like the *Historia scolastica* (the main source

⁵⁶ On training and education within the Franciscan order, see Lawrence 1994, pp. 84–88 and Roest 2000; see pp. 197–234, regarding books and libraries; cf. Ooms 1974. For Bonaventure's mysticism, see Ruh, 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 406–38 and McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 87–112. On Bonaventure as a source for Ruusbroec, see in particular Van Nieuwenhove 1998, 2000 and 2001. See also Noë 2001 (via the index entry for Bonaventure).

⁵⁷ On the Franciscans at Brussels, see Houbaert 1979 and Lefèvre 1942, pp. 100–02 (also on the Carmelites). On the Carmelites and their education, see Lansink 1967 and Lickteig 1981. See Rosier 1950, pp. 27–28, for Matthias of Cologne and Johannes Guldenaere. See also Lickteig 1981 (index).

of the *Tabernacle*). Ruusbroec could have learned much from Henricus that would prove useful later on. There is even a chance that Henricus brought up the topic of mystical theology in his lectures, since it was a subject on which his previously mentioned colleagues Rudolf of Biberach and Bertram of Ahlen had written important works. The latter, in particular, deserves special mention in connection with the Franciscan influence on Ruusbroec. It was in his capacity as lector that Ahlen wrote his mystical work, full of references to Dionysius. Was Ahlen's Brussels confrère Henricus guided by a similar interest when teaching his students?

Ruusbroec's *Realm* bears clear traces of Franciscan mystical theology, which makes it all the more regrettable that the information on Henricus is limited to the statement that in 1315 he represented his convent at a chapter meeting in Fulda – a meeting, interestingly enough, also attended by Bertram of Ahlen.⁵⁸

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As incomplete as our reconstruction of educational practices in the Brussels Franciscan convent remains, it nevertheless appears that Ruusbroec could have received theological training there. The mendicant orders had a wealth of academic scholarship at their disposal, thanks to their excellent facilities and an ample supply of trained friars. They played a key role in transforming university scholarship into practical knowledge in areas ranging from city governance to ethics and from economics to mysticism. A striking example of fourteenth-century philosophical discourse outside the university sphere is the preaching of Meister Eckhart and his fellow Dominicans, who discussed mystical issues in the German vernacular at a high theoretical level within the realm of speculative theology. This philosophical thinking was not confined to the closed circuits of professional scholarship, for the use of the vernacular brought about a cultural change as the language of the laity reached ever wider audiences. Even more important was a new, organic connection between religious life and learning. The scholar who managed to use his knowledge to pave the way to spiritual

⁵⁸ See Bihl 1908, p. 92 and Bihl 1947, p. 5, on Henricus and Ahlen at the chapter conference. Ahlen's work is edited in Beccarisi 2004, vol. I. See Barone 1993 and Roest 2000, pp. 77–81, on the level and accessibility of Franciscan education (especially the theology course) for outsiders.

wisdom changed from a *Lesemeister* (lector) into a *Lebemeister* (master of living).⁵⁹

These epithets were common in German mystical literature, which was dominated by the learned Dominicans and their speculative sermons. Middle Dutch versions of these texts had reached Ruusbroec's circle well before he started to write, but it was not until some time in the fifteenth century that the Black Friars got a foothold in Brussels by founding their own convent. In Ruusbroec's youth the Dominicans had owned only a house in the city. Ducal permission and papal recommendations notwithstanding, they had failed to overcome the resistance of the supreme Chapter of St Gudula to the founding of new religious houses in the city. Thus the situation in Brussels offers a historically satisfying explanation for Ruusbroec's lack of affinity with the intellectualism of Meister Eckhart and his Dominican friars. The *Espousals* has more in common with the writings of Bertram of Ahlen, Rudolf of Biberach and other Franciscan lectors, whose compilations and commentaries offered a mystical theology suitable for religious practice, thereby ensuring wide diffusion of spiritual thought. Biberach's *De septem itineribus*, for example, has survived in more than a hundred manuscripts.⁶⁰

Ruusbroec is much indebted to such intermediaries and texts from the periphery of professional scholarship. He assimilated what Rudolf of Biberach had compiled. One can make impressive lists of the mystical legacy traceable in the *Espousals*, and the more varied the sources, the less likely it is that Ruusbroec saw all these texts in their original form. Even if he could have roamed to his heart's content in a specialised Franciscan library, he would have studied mainly compilations and manuscripts containing collections of various writings.

Thus considerations of Ruusbroec's intellectual background inevitably run up against a question to which scholars have generally given a wide berth: the mystic's sources. Though monographs have shed some light on the subject, the full extent of Ruusbroec's sources has yet to be determined. All the great names from the mystical tradition have

⁵⁹ Warnar 2000a, pp. 695–98 and Warnar 2002b, pp. 34–42. Of the literature mentioned there, see especially De Libera 1996, pp. 299–347.

⁶⁰ See Warnar 2002b for the early dissemination of German texts in Dutch-speaking regions. On the chapter and the mendicant orders, see Lefèvre 1942, pp. 98–109. See Bonenfant 1965, p. 110, n. 2, for a reference to a *domum praedicatorum* in Brussels in a document dating from 1328.

been connected at one time or another with the *Espousals*, but we are still waiting for a systematic study of Ruusbroec's reading. This seems a glaring omission. More than a century after the first dissertation on Ruusbroec, a monograph devoted to the mystic's sources still tops the list of desiderata.⁶¹

Anyone with the courage to reconstruct Ruusbroec's library will be confronted with problems that make the more familiar complications of identifying the sources of medieval literary texts seem like child's play. To analyse any translation or adaptation, one needs the exact version of the source text. In Ruusbroec's case one is in danger, even before arriving at this point, of getting lost in a labyrinth of Latin literature. Unlike most Middle Dutch writers of his time, Ruusbroec seldom worked with one particular text as his main source. Instead, he integrated insights and notions from a mystical theology treated over centuries by many authors.

Illuminating indeed – inasmuch as it points out the complications – is Ruusbroec's connection with that founding father of mystical theology: Dionysius the Aereopagite. To prove a relationship, Dionysius's Greek texts have repeatedly been placed next to similar passages written by Ruusbroec in Middle Dutch. Impressive as this juxtaposition may seem, there can be no question of a direct correlation. Ruusbroec undoubtedly used the prefix *over* in *overnatuurlike* (supernaturally), *overvoeren* (carry over), *overvormen* (transform) and especially *overweselijc* (superessential) as the pendant of *hyper* from Dionysius's notions of the Godhead. At the very least, however, one should think of the Latin prefix *super* as the actual go-between, since Ruusbroec certainly did not belong to the medieval elite of Greek scholars.

For that matter, no knowledge of Greek was needed to read Dionysius. Since 827, when an envoy of the Byzantine emperor took a codex containing the works of Dionysius to the court of the French king Louis the Pious, several attempts had been made to translate these Greek texts into Latin. Four different translations of the complete writings were brought together in 1238 at the University of Paris in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. This imposing textbook was only one of the memorable

⁶¹ An assessment of the research into Ruusbroec's sources is to be found in Ruh 1996, p. 4, repeated in Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 29–30. A first overview of the source study is included in Axters 1964, cols. 866–74, with recent additions in Schepers 1999, pp. 131–32. See also Ampe 1975a, pp. 634–36, with reference to what he considers the rather inadequate work done by d'Asbeck 1928.

episodes in a magnificent textual history that we can assess much better than Ruusbroec could. The transcendental theology of Dionysius was disseminated in the Middle Ages through numerous compilations, treatises and commentaries written by renowned theologians and lesser luminaries alike – Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, for example, as well as Bertram of Ahlen and Rudolf of Biberach, to name but a few.⁶²

Expanding upon Ruusbroec's relations with the Friars Minor, we may certainly consider the possibility that he studied the work of Dionysius in their library. Bertram of Ahlen quoted so copiously from the work of the Aereopagite that his monastery must have had a copy, and the Franciscans in Brussels possibly had one as well. Then again, there is no compelling reason to believe that Ruusbroec ever had direct access to Dionysian sources. This body of ideas had entered Middle Dutch literature through many channels. Certainly from the mid-fourteenth century there were texts circulating in Brussels in Ruusbroec's mother tongue which presented Dionysius as the patron saint of a new mystical theology. However, his name is not mentioned even once in Ruusbroec's work, and although Dionysius's ideas are apparent, no quotation has thus far been discovered.⁶³

Ruusbroec's indefinable relationship to the writings of Dionysius is symptomatic of his connections with the work of other great figures in the history of mystical literature: Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry and Richard of St Victor. Even though Ruusbroec undeniably appropriated the ideas, expressions and perceptions of these authors for use in his own writings, direct borrowings can rarely be pointed out. Indirectly, it can be established that Ruusbroec was familiar with these writers, since they are all listed in an annotated catalogue of famous Christian authors, of which the oldest known manuscript comes from Groenendaal but is old enough to have been consulted by Ruusbroec while still in Brussels.⁶⁴

⁶² The first to write about Ruusbroec and Dionysius was Van Poppel 1912. See further DS III, cols. 361–65 (Ampe's contribution deals with the influence of Dionysius on Ruusbroec's work). See Ruh 1990–99, vol. I, pp. 71–82, on the history of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

⁶³ In connection with the Franciscans, see also Marks 1974, pp. 372–73, on a thirteenth-century manuscript containing all the texts of Dionysius and an index compiled by a Franciscan lector from Cologne. On Dionysius in Middle Dutch, see Warnar 2002b, Kwakkel & Mulder 2001 and Scheepsma 2001.

⁶⁴ The relationship between Richard of St Victor and Ruusbroec was the subject

Using this catalogue, Ruusbroec could go in search of specific writings. He could, for example, read that an important work by Richard of St Victor explains how one can ascend to a higher plane in the spiritual life of contemplation. If we knew for certain that Ruusbroec had laid eyes on annotations of this kind, it would mean a big step forward in the study of his sources, but the catalogue still does not tell us how the mystic got hold of the texts of all the authors listed. Their views had become known not only through the circulation of their writings but also through their integration into new texts, ending up in compilations like those of Biberach and assimilated into superior syntheses such as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. Even assuming that Ruusbroec did study this work, one must first unravel the fabric of Bonaventure's text in order to identify its threads in the pattern of the *Espousals*, whereby the role possibly played by intermediaries such as Ahlen and Biberach either aggravates the problems or clears them up in one fell swoop. Ruusbroec did not, in fact, need more than one comprehensive overview. Such compilations did exist, and they represented – not only in the eyes of Gerson – precisely the same currents in mystical thought as the *Espousals*. In the earliest manuscripts containing the Latin translation of Ruusbroec's work we also encounter works by Biberach and Ahlen, but other intermediaries likewise deserve closer attention. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Hendrik Bate was living in Mechelen near Brussels, where, after an ecclesiastical career, he set about writing his twenty-three-volume *Speculum divinatorum et quorundum naturalium*, in which he describes an intellectual approach to mysticism that is of considerable interest when examining the scientific bias of Ruusbroec's intellectual milieu.⁶⁵

To paint a clear picture of Ruusbroec's intellectual position, however, we must also point out that the chaplain, writing in the vernacular, could not have been on an equal footing with the erudite elite of the

of the oldest Ruusbroec study in book form (Engelhardt 1838). On Ruusbroec's relationship to Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry, see Willeumier-Schalij 1948; Ampe 1953; Ampe 1957a; Verdeyen 1977 and 1995a; Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 39–76 (passim). For the catalogue, see Mantingh 2000, pp. 54–63; Häring 1970 (edition); Hendrix 1993, pp. 182–83 (on the Groenendaal manuscript, though here it is wrongly assumed to have originated elsewhere).

⁶⁵ For the manuscripts, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 29 (*Espousals* and Biberach) and Combes 1945–72, pp. 82–84 (*Espousals* and Ahlen). In addition to Bertram of Ahlen and Rudolf of Biberach, there is another Minorite who deserves attention in this respect: Gilbert of Tournai. See Sassen 1948, pp. 70–72 and Roest 1999. On Bate, see Warnar 2002a, p. 38 and n. 30, with references to the literature.

mendicant orders. Although it is likely that he acquired his knowledge of theology from lectors and monastery libraries, Ruusbroec was obviously not a professional academic. His mode of thought focused on the assimilation of ideas and not on the elaboration of specific propositions. To Ruusbroec it made little difference whether he immersed himself in the great mystical authors, consulted standard theological reference works or studied the Harmony of the Gospels in his mother tongue.

Such openmindedness emerges most clearly from the proportionately large number of Middle Dutch works among Ruusbroec's sources – even when the higher authority of Latin literature was within easy reach. The main source of the *Tabernacle* is the *Historia scolastica*. This standard work of biblical exegesis also covers the gospels, but Ruusbroec consulted these in a Middle Dutch translation. Elsewhere in the *Tabernacle* he temporarily preferred Jacob van Maerlant's *Der naturen bloeme* (*Nature's Finest*) – a work of great value as a Dutch encyclopaedia of nature, though it pales into insignificance next to the overpowering authority of the *Historia scolastica* as a manual of scriptural exegesis. In the *Espousals*, too, Ruusbroec blithely swings back and forth in the same chapter between Richard of St Victor's classical mysticism and the Middle Dutch cosmography *Natuurkunde van het geheelal* (*Natural Science of the Universe*), which shows yet again that he was more widely read than truly erudite. Ruusbroec, far removed from the front line of philosophical skirmishes, was nevertheless in the vanguard of Middle Dutch letters, unequivocal proof of which was supplied by *The Realm of Lovers*.⁶⁶

4. 'The first book he made'

Ruusbroec's first text could provide the material for a classic case study of the peculiarities of literature in a manuscript culture. *The Realm of Lovers* has survived in both complete and partial fifteenth-century copies, but Ruusbroec did not initially intend this work for circulation. Such reserve was not unusual. Spiritual texts in particular were often written only for readers in the authors' own circles, and a limited number of

⁶⁶ On the Harmony of the Gospels, cf. Bergsma 1898, pp. 268–74 (even-numbered pages) and the *Tabernacle* 5:2236–90. See Bastings 1991 for *Der naturen bloeme*. For an example of borrowing from Richard of St Victor, see the word *tripudieren*, meaning 'dance' (*Espousals* b402, cf. Ruh 1990–99, vol. I, p. 402) in a passage based in part on the *Natuurkunde*.

copies were thus circulated under their supervision. This was also the case with the *Realm*. Ruusbroec worked on it in the 1330s at the latest, but the earliest record of the text dates from around 1360, when the Carthusian monk Gerard of Saintes copied five works by Ruusbroec, one of which was the *Realm*. For this copy Brother Gerard wrote a prologue, in which he told of his encounter with the author. At the invitation of the Carthusians, Ruusbroec had come to Brother Gerard's monastery in Herne – a day's walk from Groenendaal – to talk about his teachings. When the Carthusians confronted Ruusbroec with the most daring of the propositions he had made in the *Realm*, he seemed dismayed that they even knew the work. Copies had apparently been circulated without his knowledge. Embarrassed by Ruusbroec's reaction, Brother Gerard offered to return his copy of the *Realm*, but Ruusbroec declined the offer, promising to treat the points discussed in more detail in a separate text – *The Booklet of Clarification*. Thus the *Realm* finally received the author's imprimatur.⁶⁷

That Ruusbroec did not seize this opportunity to take the *Realm* out of circulation has to do with the status of written literature in the Middle Ages. Before the invention of printing, there was no readily discernible difference between an author's personal copy and an authorised version of a text to be copied for distribution. The only difference was between the spoken and the written word, or as stated in another, later introduction to Ruusbroec's works: 'The spoken word must die away, while written truth will always stay' (*Die levende stemme moet vergaen, ghescreven waerheit blivet staen*). What was written was true – as well as public.⁶⁸

Ruusbroec, moreover, must have feared that even more copies were in circulation. The Carthusians of Herne were very active scribes, deeply involved in Brussels book production, and it was through these channels that they had managed to get hold of Ruusbroec's works. Brother Gerard stated that the Carthusians' copy of the *Realm* had been lent to them secretly by a priest who had been Ruusbroec's notary (*notarius*), an enigmatic figure who is generally thought to have been Ruusbroec's

⁶⁷ Brother Gerard's prologue is to be found in De Vreese 1895, pp. 7–20. On Ruusbroec and Brother Gerard, see Mertens 1993b and 1995b, pp. 66–69. On medieval text circulation, see Doyle 1989 and Bourgain 1989. See Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 305–07, regarding the reception of the *Realm*, with additional material in the introduction to the edition of the *Realm*.

⁶⁸ De Vreese 1895, p. 107.

personal assistant or secretary. In the fourteenth century, however, notaries already fulfilled a function more or less equivalent to that of their modern-day counterparts, that is to say, they had the authority to draw up and authenticate official documents. Priests often carried out notarial duties on the side. Connected as they were with the city's clerks and professional scribes, priest-notaries could easily be enlisted to assist in book production and associated activities, which in Brussels were concentrated in the vicinity of St Gudula's, in Perkamentstraat (Parchment Street) and on Wolfsgracht – which were connected by Loxemstraat, where Ruusbroec lived. This makes it all the more likely that Ruusbroec's *notarius* frequented the Brussels circles of professional scribes, in which case the mystic had to assume that he no longer had any control over the dissemination of the *Realm*, much as he would have liked to keep his first work private.⁶⁹

The most common explanation for Ruusbroec's reticence is that he himself doubted the correctness of several bold assertions he had made in the *Realm* regarding man's union with God. According to Brother Gerard, however, Ruusbroec had other reasons to regret that the text had been made public, 'for it was the first book he made' (*want het was dierste boec dat hi maecte*). Apparently it was as simple as that. Even an enlightened soul like Ruusbroec could not help being embarrassed by the inevitable shortcomings of his overly ambitious early work. As an attempt to chart the world of mystical theology and contemplation, the *Realm* was doomed to failure, if only because of the author's inexperience.⁷⁰

After the much more successful *Espousals*, the *Realm* no longer had a future as an independent text. A comparison of these two works clearly shows that Ruusbroec, when working on the *Realm*, was so engrossed in the subject matter that the presentation of his ideas suffered as a result. Next to the masterly *Espousals*, the *Realm* seems marred by terse reasoning and sketchy development. Ruusbroec begins both texts with

⁶⁹ On notaries, see Van den Bichelaer 1998; regarding Brabant in general, see pp. 39–41; for offices and persons, see pp. 113–68. Regarding the involvement of the city's clerks and notaries in the production of literature, see Kerby-Fulton & Justice 1997. Perkamentstraat is recorded in Lefèvre 1942, p. 232. On the connections between the Carthusians of Herne and Brussels manuscript production, see Kwakkel 2002.

⁷⁰ The quotation of Brother Gerard appears in De Vreese 1895, p. 13. On the *Realm* as an impressive but only partly successful experiment, see Willaert 1993b, p. 71. Other noteworthy publications on the text dwell on the great effort put into its creation but ignore the overall result (Noë 1989 and 2001 and Wackers 2000).

a quotation from scripture, which he presents as the basis of the whole work. In the *Realm* this is done with extreme brevity. After the biblical passage, Ruusbroec launches, without any introduction, into a five-part division: ‘In these words the wise man teaches us five things’ (*In desen woerden leert ons de wise man .v. dinghe*), the wise man being Solomon. After listing the themes one by one, Ruusbroec comes straight to the point: ‘Now then, as to the first’ (*Nu dan van den iersten*).⁷¹

By contrast, in the first lines of the *Espousals* Ruusbroec gives us an example of the rhetorical presentation of a *divisio thematis*:

‘Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him.’ St Matthew the Evangelist records these words for us. And Christ spoke them to His disciples and to all mankind in a parable which one reads of the virgins.

*Siet, de brudegom comt; gaet ute hem te ontmoete. Dese woorden beschrievet ons Sinte Matheus de evangeliste. Ende Cristus spracse te sinen jongheren ende tot allen menscen in eene ghelijckenisse datmen leest vanden maegden.*⁷²

Ruusbroec gives both the place and the context of the biblical passage from the Gospel according to St Matthew: a parable Jesus recounted to His disciples, but one that concerns everyone – thus addressing the widest possible audience. The addition ‘which one reads of the virgins’ (*datmen leest vanden maegden*) can be understood as a reference to the liturgical calendar. The pericope for the feast day of St Agnes was the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Ruusbroec develops the motif of a spiritual marriage between Christ and human nature in a general introduction on the fall of man and his salvation. He then arrives at the thematic division: ‘In these words Christ our lover teaches us four things’ (*In desen woerden leert ons Cristus onse minnare IIII dinghe*). At this point Ruusbroec lays out his plan: ‘We wish to expound and explain these words in three ways’ (*Dese worde wille wij dieden ende ontbinden in drien manieren*). And only then does his exposition take off – as in the *Realm* – with the words that resounded in many a medieval *lectio* and sermon: ‘Now then, as to the first’ (*Nu dan vanden eersten*).⁷³

The *Espousals* was Ruusbroec’s true debut in the sense that, as an author, he purposely stepped into public view with a work also intended for readers outside his own circle. Unlike the *Realm*, the *Espousals* had

⁷¹ See *Realm* 1–19.

⁷² *Espousals* 1–4.

⁷³ *Espousals* 1–56. Regarding this passage, cf. Willaert 1995, p. 55. On the pericope, see Goossens 1994, p. 21 and cf. De Bruin 1970b, p. 319.

been composed as a text that gradually led its readers into the world of mystical theology. To prepare one's soul for the meeting with God, Ruusbroec offered scores of spiritual 'exercises' (*oefeninghen*) – a word that appears more than seventy times in the *Espousals*, whereas it occurs but once in the *Realm*. On his first voyage of discovery in 'the realm of God' (*dat rijke gods*) Ruusbroec took little heed of his public: attempting to sort out his own ideas, he sought to assign a place to everything – from the sacraments to the signs of the zodiac, and from six classes of people unsuited to the mystical life to the threefold reward one receives in 'the superessence of God' (*dat overwesen gods*).

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If we can call the *Espousals* a synthesis, the *Realm* was a summa in rudimentary form: beginning with God as the highest principle and Christ in His human nature, and proceeding to Creation as manifested in the elements, the heavens and the faculties of the soul. Ruusbroec took as his guideline the customary division of medieval texts on the world view. However, it is mainly its striving to find a closed system for explaining the meaning of Creation which makes the *Realm* seem like a mystical variation on such encyclopaedic literature.⁷⁴

Before Ruusbroec began to write, he had garnered great spiritual riches through long years of study and contemplation. To maintain a foothold in the abundance of mystical material, he had recourse to schematisations – particularly in the fourth and by far the longest part of the *Realm*, which deals with the paths leading to the kingdom of God, already then a classic metaphor for mankind's spiritual progression, which many authors varied by offering their own metaphorical itineraries. Ruusbroec, however, systematically paved a threefold path to his own world view. He began by distinguishing between the corporeal, the natural and the supernatural path. The 'corporeal path of the senses' (*lijftlic seltlic wech*) leads through Creation – via the four elements of earth, air, fire and water – upwards to the three heavens, that is to say, leading ever outward, to the firmament where the planets revolve, the crystalline, transparent heaven and the uppermost heaven as the seat of God. The 'natural path' (*natuerleec wech*) is an introspective exploration of the psychic powers, leading to the essence of the

⁷⁴ On the encyclopaedic genre, see Meyer 2000, pp. 33–40 and Gottschall 1992, pp. 12–24. See Noë 1989 regarding the systematic arrangement of the *Realm* in relation to the medieval world view.

soul that is directly united with its divine origin. Here, too, Ruusbroec distinguishes seven links, analogous to the image of mankind current at the time. The passions, desire, reason and self-determination (*vriheit des willen*) together make up the lower, affective faculties of the soul, while memory, intellect and the will comprise the higher, intellectual faculties. Finally, Ruusbroec identifies the ‘supernatural, divine path’ (*overnatuerlijc godleec wech*) as the working of the Holy Spirit by means of the seven gifts that flow like seven streams through the realm of the soul, fertilising it in numerous ways.⁷⁵

These passages, in all their brevity, offer fundamental explanations of three basic lines of thought in Ruusbroec’s philosophy of the experience of God. One pivotal concept in his thinking was a view of nature that attributed an allegorical meaning to everything. In Creation one could find God’s revelation and presence as a ‘footprint’ (*voetspore*) or ‘rough likeness’ (*grof ghelijckenisse*). Ruusbroec found a second pivotal idea in the theories of the human psyche, which revolved around the notion that the soul reflected in its core the image of God: ‘the souls’ essence that hangs in God’ (*dat wesen der zielen dat hanct in Gode*). Theology – in this case the doctrine of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit – showed the means of grace through which contact between God and the faithful was possible, and how it could deepen and lead to insights that man could never achieve on his own.⁷⁶

Thus differentiated, the material was then integrated into a spiritual, multi-dynamic model of transformation. Each of the seven gifts corresponds to the part of Creation and the particular faculty of the soul in the same position within its own hierarchy. The first gift is the fear of God that has ‘enriched and transformed by means of the divine virtues the first element – that is, the earth – and also the irascible faculty’.⁷⁷ The element of earth is linked to the trees, plants and animals in the earthly paradise, and these symbolise reverence, humility and obedience – each one a virtue stimulated by fear of the Lord. Completely in accordance with current notions, Ruusbroec assumed that receptiveness to the seven gifts set in motion a complicated mechanism of virtues in the human psyche. The next gift is benevolence, and this enhances – ‘with extraordinary enrichment’ (*met sunderlingher cierheit*) – desire and the

⁷⁵ *Realm* 168–332.

⁷⁶ *Realm* 299–300.

⁷⁷ *Realm* 655–57: ‘gheciert ende overformt met godliken doechden dat ierste element – dat es de eerde – ende oec de toernighe cracht’.

element of water. The image of benevolence as water is developed by comparing this gift with the spring in the earthly paradise from which four rivers flow to fertilise the four corners of the earth. Ruusbroec distinguishes four metaphorical streams of compassion, which spring from benevolence and flow into heaven (compassion with Christ's sufferings), into purgatory (compassion with the souls in torment), throughout the earth (compassion towards all Christendom), and into all those souls in need of charity.⁷⁸

The particulars of the earthly paradise, unmistakably taken from encyclopaedic literature, are sublimated in Ruusbroec's realm of thought to an image of the religious. The key word in this transformation is the Middle Dutch word *cierheit*, whose meanings include 'adornment', 'enrichment', 'excellence' and 'splendour'. Every higher variant of the affective, the natural and the supernatural path encompasses and enriches the lower forms. The third gift is self-knowledge: 'It enriches the first two gifts, namely fear and benevolence'. Corresponding to this gift is the element of air, and the corresponding faculty of the soul is reason: 'This air of the rational faculty is adorned with many sorts of birds. These birds are acts performed with discernment. Some birds walk on the earth, some float on the water, some fly in the air, some fly in the upper air, up to the fire.'⁷⁹

These symbolic birds show how the air of knowledge is related to the lower elements: the water of benevolence and the earth of fear. Ruusbroec, though, also points forward to the higher element of fire, which is coupled to 'spiritual fortitude' (*starcheit*), stating in his discussion of this gift that fire is an 'enrichment of all the elements' (*cierheit alle der elemente*). In this way Ruusbroec expanded his symbolic world view. Memory, the intellect and the will accompany the gifts of counsel, understanding and wisdom, past the firmament with the seven planets and the crystalline heaven, to 'the uppermost heaven' (*den oversten hemele*), which Ruusbroec imagines as a 'pure, simple resplendence' (*pure, sempele*

⁷⁸ *Realm* 826. See *DS* III, cols. 1591–92, on the role of the seven gifts in the contemplative life; cf. Tuve 1966, pp. 92–102 and the table on p. 442.

⁷⁹ *Realm* 911 ('Si ciert de .ij. vorste gaven, dat es vreesse ende goedertierenheit') and 989–92 ('Dese locht der redeleker cracht es gheciert met menegherande voghelen. Die voghele dat sijn besceedene werke. Selke voghele wandelen op der eerden, ende selke vlieten inden watere, ende selke vliegghen inder locht, ende selke vliegghen in dat overste der locht tot bi den viere'). Cf., for example, Dirc van Delft in the *Tafel vanden kersten ghelove* regarding the idea of the rivers flowing forth from the earthly paradise (Daniëls 1937–39, vol. I, pp. 36–41).

clærheit), ‘immobile’ (*ombeweechlijc*) – meaning both ‘immovable’ and ‘immutable’ – and the source and beginning of all Creation.⁸⁰

Ruusbroec created in linguistic signs and symbols a world view in which each detail was decorated with the adornments of God’s greatness. Every part of the micro- and macrocosmos had its place in the universe of God-seekers: from the plants to the planets and from the most bestial of desires to the loftiest of intellects. Observation of nature, religious psychology and theology combined to produce a symbolic universe unparalleled in Dutch literature. While many modern-day authors do not even imagine themselves masters of their own world, Ruusbroec was able to build to his heart’s content on a mystical system of the elements. His thinking was fuelled by the firm medieval conviction that Creation was a perfectly meaningful and cohesive whole and that the essence of things could be deduced from observable phenomena.

In the work of Ruusbroec, symbolism and conceptualisation are nearly on an equal footing. The interplay of symbols and meaning is overwhelming, but it is the sheer wealth of imagery, even more than the intricate systematics, that commands respect. The fascinating thing about the *Realm*, however, is Ruusbroec’s preoccupation with order. The author sought to find – even more fervently than his metaphorical paths to God’s kingdom suggest – a place for everything that occurred to him during study and prayer. He spun additional threads into his web of sevens by referring to the Beatitudes, and he compared the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit with the exemplary qualities of Christ emanating from both His human and His godly nature. The most cogent evidence of Ruusbroec’s need for order is his bestowal of two variants to the gifts of spiritual fortitude and divine counsel, thus arriving at a number that could link up neatly with the hierarchy of the nine choirs of angels.

The *Realm* follows the same pattern as the medieval summae that sought to force the divine order of Creation into a mould in which all knowledge and skill had its own proper place. This inventarisation was never an end in itself. The beauty in Creation was a direct reflection of God, as well as a link to the higher truth of invisible things. From a meaningful sequence of images, definitions, models and figures of speech emerged numerous hierarchical series that gave direction and purpose to a form of meditation in which the figurative and the rhetorical converged.

⁸⁰ *Realm* 1157–59, 1745 ff, 2170–74 and 2416–19.

The visual aspect is of great importance in the transformational processes described in the *Realm*. To begin with, we must seriously consider the possibility that Ruusbroec's imagery was inspired by illustrated books setting forth the medieval world view. There was a rich artistic tradition of miniatures depicting Creation in a variety of images that occur in the *Realm*. Of crucial importance, however, is the interaction between sensory and spiritual vision in mystical literature, in which 'visions', 'images', 'illumination' and 'contemplation' were the order of the day. Nor did this apply only to figurative language, for in the Middle Ages it was thought that the mind's eye could observe a higher, abstract reality, just as one could actually see the tangible, concrete world. At the very beginning of the *Realm*, Ruusbroec stated that God could be seen and perceived in the sublunary world, through the senses; in higher spheres one can 'imagine and speculate' (*ymagineren ende speculeren*) – two concepts derived from Latin words which even in their modern-day meanings of 'imagining' and 'reflecting' bring out the highly visual aspect of Ruusbroec's thinking.⁸¹

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The mind, traversing the paths outlined in *The Realm of Lovers*, travelled simultaneously through the microcosmos of the soul and the macrocosmos of Creation – a seeming impossibility which is easily overcome in the symbolic language of medieval mysticism. Meditation enabled one to climb upwards alongside the choirs of angels as well as to turn inwards and seek God in the essence of the soul. The mind moves in the same way – in what only appears to be a contrary motion – in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, a text that clearly left its mark on *The Realm of Lovers*.

Following in the footsteps of the Franciscan grand master of mysticism, Ruusbroec crossed the age-old chasm in theology between two incompatible ideas: the immanent image of the Trinity in the soul and the transcendental view of a supreme being. Bonaventure was the first to bring these ideas closer together. In his philosophy the mind must first turn inwards, there finding the reflection of the divine persons, in order to achieve the highest state of rapture in which one beholds the

⁸¹ For a detailed treatment of the imagery used in the *Realm*, see Noë 2001. Regarding the encyclopaedic genre, see Meyer 2000, pp. 27–29. On meditation, see Willaert 1993b, who applies theories from Carruthers 1994 and 1998 to the work of Ruusbroec, especially the *Realm*. For the relationship between visual perception and contemplation in Ruusbroec, see Rothstein 1999; see in general Hamburger 2000.

Supreme Being. Ruusbroec gratefully adopted this idea, sketching the highest form of bliss in which the distinct qualities of the divine persons have receded and only their common essence remains. Ruusbroec's own words – *in ontvoltenheiden der persoene na persoanleker eighenscap in dien wiseloesen wesene gods* – are full of Dutch neologisms: *in ontvoltenheiden der persoene* ('in the condition of the [divine] persons flowing away') *na persoanleker eighenscap in dien wiseloesen wesene gods* (according to their characteristics as [divine] persons in a modeless being of God).⁸²

For the uninitiated, this difficult language was utterly unintelligible, but specialists must have recognised in Ruusbroec's Middle Dutch an extremely faithful rendering from the Latin of theological jargon. It is no coincidence that the lines in question come from a passage about the Trinity in which Bonaventure's voice clearly resounds. Typical of his Trinitarian theology were notions about the fecundity (*fecunditas*) of God the Father in begetting the Son and the Holy Spirit in a complicated relationship of unity and trinity. Ruusbroec, too, wrote about the 'great fruitful nature of God' (*hogher vrochtbarigher natueren gods*). In this section of the *Realm* he used, within the space of fifty lines (in the modern edition), the term fruitful(ness) ten times, and introduced the equally Bonaventurian concept of 'fatherhood' (*vaderlijcheit*), or paternity (*paternitas*), as an equivalent of the fruitful divine nature.⁸³

Here Ruusbroec ventured into particularly erudite terrain, but if he intended to follow Bonaventure's flight to theological heights, he could not keep up with the Franciscan for more than a chapter. This was due not so much to incompetence as to impatience. The *Realm* is a restless text, in which Ruusbroec proceeds from one stylistic experiment to the next. Earlier he had embarked on a personification-allegory of the 'love' (*minne*) that prepares the realm of the soul for the feast and the coming of the bridegroom. This is not advance notice of *The Spiritual Espousals*, but rather a variation on the imagery of the Song of Songs. Here Ruusbroec is trying out the allegorical style and affective idiom of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians which had made its way into Middle Dutch literature through sermons and the writings of the

⁸² On the *Itinerarium*, see McGinn 1974, Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 412–28. Regarding Bonaventure's solution to the two images of God, see Murphy 1993; Turner 1995, pp. 102–34; Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, p. 435. Quotation from the *Realm* 1628–33; cf. 1498–1508. On Ruusbroec's connection to Bonaventure, see Van Nieuwenhove 2001.

⁸³ See *Realm* 1587–1639 for Ruusbroec's variations on *fecunditas*. See Ruh 1984, pp. 14–54, on medieval Trinitarianism expounded in the vernacular, and pp. 31–32 on *fecunditas* in Bonaventure.

beguine Hadewijch. Ruusbroec strays only briefly into the realm of allegory, however, before attempting – in alternating verse and prose – to describe religious sensations and to examine the effects of protracted panegyrics on the characteristics ascribable to God. He paints a detailed picture of what will happen at the Last Judgement, based on a standard work on the subject, incidentally giving his opinion on what was then a subject of hot debate, the *visio beatifica*: the question of whether the blessed will behold God's countenance before or after the Last Judgement.⁸⁴

The *Realm of Lovers* is a kaleidoscope of styles and genres written with great intensity but lacking mature judgement. The symphonic unity of the *Espousals* is nowhere manifest in the etudes of the *Realm*. A wide variety of motifs and multiple tonalities are characteristic of an author still searching for his own voice. Embarking on his exploratory voyage in the *Realm*, Ruusbroec enthusiastically set his course, only to change tack abruptly and sail in another direction – just as briefly – at the first available opportunity. It was the uncertainty of a beginning writer weighed down so much by his ideas that he was unable to achieve a balanced and convincing symbiosis of form and content.

Ruusbroec, however, was as fickle as he was determined. His longing for order betrays an almost reckless resolve to reveal the great plan of Creation. In assembling his mosaic of interrelationships involving nature, spiritual life and the contemplation of God, he cemented every motif firmly in place. Even so, the tight composition of the *Realm* is deceptive. The exorbitant number of analogies do not seem to have arisen naturally from Ruusbroec's reflections. Was he clinging to a mathematical construction to avoid drowning in his deepest thoughts? Or was his unbridled passion for order simply the result of excessive faith in the technique of the *summa*? In any case, the *Realm* stranded in a quagmire of strict systematics. Ruusbroec had undoubtedly intended to lay a broad foundation for his thoughts and images, leading to God's deepest secrets, but the many cross-references in the *Realm* led to stagnation instead of momentum, for ultimately one must let go of all

⁸⁴ *Realm* 1553–74 (allegory), 1306–84 (verse and prose) and 2263–2311 (panegyric). See Reynaert 1994 and 1981a on Hadewijch's imagery and its place in the mystical tradition. A direct link between the *Realm* and the literature of the Cistercians consists in the image of metals alloyed in fire as a metaphor of mystical transformation (*Realm* 2338–48); see Pépin 1967, esp. pp. 337–40. On Ruusbroec's discussion of the Last Judgement (*Realm* 2492–2611), see Noë 2000; for the source, see Schepers 1999, esp. pp. 135–41. See Trottmann 1995 for the context of the discussion of the *visio beatifica*.

images, signs and phenomena to enter God's realm – or, as Ruusbroec expressed it many years later:

If you seek to climb by means of your intellect from earth into the highest heaven, then you must pass beyond the elements and all the heavens that separate them; thus, by your faith, you find God in His realm. In like manner, if you want to climb above faith in the apex of your createdness, which is a hidden heaven, you must be enriched with all good works without, and with virtues and holy practices within. And then you shall pass beyond your senses and your imagination and all images, corporeal and spiritual, reasons and forms, and all consideration. Thus you shall be lifted up in an imageless (*onghebeelt*), bare vision, in divine light: there you can contemplate the realm of God in you and God in His realm.⁸⁵

It is tempting to read into this passage from Ruusbroec's last work, *On the Twelve Beguines*, a reflection on his earliest piece of writing; whatever the case, it is an apt explanation of what had stymied the author in the *Realm*. His rich store of imagery, metaphor and allegory tend more to prompt 'wonderment at all this richness' (*verwonderen van al deser rijkheit*' is the title of Hilde Noë's recent dissertation on the figurative language of the *Realm*) than to incite one to climb upwards to the ultimate abstraction of staring blindly into the divine light.

The intensity of the *Realm* lends the text a special status within Ruusbroec's oeuvre and thus within Middle Dutch literature. Nevertheless, at some point the author put the work aside – whether through disappointment at falling short of his high expectations or simply because he had abandoned the idea of fitting the wonder of mysticism into a closed system, we will never know. The *Realm* was in every respect 'the first book he made', but even though it epitomised the beginning writer's struggle with inexperience, the *Realm* represented a huge step forward on the road to the *Espousals*.

The completion of this masterpiece meant the definite end of the *Realm*. Even if Ruusbroec had not already stopped working on it, after

⁸⁵ *Beguines* 2b/68–77: 'Wildi clemmen met uwen verstande van der eerden inden oversten hemel, soe moeti overliden die elemente ende alle die hemele die daer tuschen middelen, soe vindi gode in sijn rijke met uwen ghelove. Alsoe ghelijckerwijs, wildi clemmen boven ghelove in dat overste uwer ghesapenheit – dat es een verborghen hemel – soe moeti ghechiert sijn met allen goeden werken van buten ende met duechden ende heiligher oefeninghen van binnen. Ende dan suldi overliden uwe sinne ende uwe ymaginacie ende alle beelden, lijflijcke ende gheestelijcke, redenen ende formen ende alle ghemerc. Ende alsoe suldi verhaven sijn in een onghhebeelt blooet ghesichte in godlijcken lichte. Daer moechdi scouwen dat rijke gods in u ende gode in sijn rijke.'

the *Espousals* there would have been no reason to continue. In any case, the *Realm* underwent a metamorphosis, changing from a text in progress to a storeroom of ideas, which Ruusbroec continued to draw upon with regularity. It was, however, the Carthusians of Herne who saved the *Realm* from oblivion, for it is owing to them that the text was granted an independent existence in the shadow of Ruusbroec's great writings.

It was not until the end of the twentieth century that the *Realm* was rediscovered as a Middle Dutch showpiece of scholastic order and hierarchy. In the context of Ruusbroec's life and work, the *Realm* teaches us, above all, that his early career as a writer was a lonely undertaking. The mystic, who was later visited in Groenendaal by faithful followers from far and near, worked in silence and seclusion, with little thought for his readers. The author seems mainly to be involved in his own deliberations when, for example, he jots down the fact that he is interrupting his train of thought to write a rhyming passage on how God makes his presence known to the unwilling: 'I write down and elucidate all these ways because I prize His fathomless wisdom and His great mercy and His great generosity.'⁸⁶

The *Realm* was not, however, written completely without regard for its readers. The text contains series of strophes in which Ruusbroec suddenly addresses his readers: 'If you want to turn thereto' (*Wildere u toe keeren*), 'Now I will describe for you' (*Nu willec u bescriven*), 'Now I will show you' (*Noch willic u toenen*), 'Now I want to teach you' (*Nu willec u leeren*) and 'Now I will explain to you' (*Nu willic u vertrecken*).⁸⁷ At the end of each section on the gifts of the Holy Spirit – each gift being treated separately – is a summary in verse with guidelines for the true seeker of God. Even though the language of the mystic resounds in every line, these are nonetheless fairly general bits of advice, such as four factors that rob one of 'virtuousness' (*doechdelecheit*). Anyone who turns to the outside world remains far from unity of spirit. They do not become aware of simple resplendence and clarity, because of 'their miserable condition' (*haers selfs elendicheit*). They are downcast and acquiesce in their 'creatureliness' (*creaturlicheit*). If they were to dispel such thoughts, 'they would be able to strive upwards and savour God's

⁸⁶ *Realm* 1328–30: 'Dat ic alle dese wisen bescrive ende verclare, dat es om dat ic prise sine grondelose wijsheit ende sine grote ontfarmicheit ende sine groete mildicheit.'

⁸⁷ *Realm* 711, 731, 893, 1055 and 1453.

touch' (*si mochten opweert crighen ende smaken gods gherinen*). This is the tenor of the following passage, from which it will become apparent that the Middle Dutch verses are not of great poetical merit:

Now to you I will explain
 four things that act as virtue's bane
 and rob one of all purity.
 Those who, turning outward, yearn
 for praise and honour in their turn
 are far removed from unity.
 Such simple, one-fold clarity
 they will surely fail to see,
 exiled in their misery.
 They will never be uplifted,
 for with sloth they are afflicted,
 happy to be creaturely.
 If they would cast off idleness,
 they could ascend to spheres most blessed,
 and savour God's proximity
 and thus possess eternity.

*Nu willic u verklaren
 viere dinc die verswaren
 ende beroeven doechdeleecheit.
 Die hen buten keeren
 ende soeken lof ende eere
 si sijn verre vander enicheit.
 Dat eenvuldighe clare
 en werdense niet gheware
 in haers selfs elendicheit.
 Si en sijn niet verresen
 want traechheit es hen bleven,
 si rasten in creaturlycheit.
 Maer wouden sise verdriven,
 si mochten opweert crighen
 ende smaken gods gherinen
 ende besitten ewicheit.⁸⁸*

More intriguing than the fact of Ruusbroec's emergence as a poet – albeit a rather mediocre one – is that here he presents himself for the first time as a spiritual guide. Although he did not initially want the *Realm* to be circulated, he apparently maintained the option of making the text accessible to a small circle, since the verses – as a concise

⁸⁸ *Realm* 2051–66. For a discussion of these verses, see Willaert 1993a, esp. pp. 148–50.

summary of the material discussed – would have proved valuable mainly to people other than the author. A likely context could have been public or semi-public lectures; another is the sphere of sermons, the mystical thought of which was often summarised in strophic texts. Chaplains like Ruusbroec were not entitled to preach, however. It would have been more in keeping with Ruusbroec's position to have passages from the *Realm* read at informal gatherings (*collationes*) in which the author gave advice and instruction to those seeking it.⁸⁹

Thus there were semi-public contexts in which the *Realm* could have been discussed, but at this point we can only hypothesise. The story of the priest-cum-notary to whom the Carthusians attributed their copy of the *Realm* is still the clearest indication of the circles in which the text circulated, consisting mainly of Brussels clerics and priests like Ruusbroec himself, interested in the content and possessing the means to make copies themselves. Various priests of St Gudula's were closely connected with the city's scribes. The Brussels chaplain Petrus van Huffel, a close colleague of Ruusbroec, is one of those recorded as municipal secretary in the period 1340–60. Brussels scribes had early access to the *Realm*; the oldest excerpts from the text appear in two manuscripts with saints' calendars, whose inclusion of St Gudula point to their origin in Brussels.⁹⁰

One of these manuscripts is a luxuriously produced codex of 1374 which includes the legend of *Beatrijs*, a classic of medieval Dutch literature. The other is a small volume dating from around 1400, which can best be described as a mystical compendium. Numerous short chapters discuss the religious ethics of the seeker of God, the central theme being a maxim, cast in verse and repeated a number of times, which begins as follows:

⁸⁹ Regarding verses in sermons, see Zielemans 1978, pp. 272–83; for verses connected with mystical sermons, see Meyer 1994 and Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, p. 190. On *collationes* in general, see Mertens 1996; see also Lievens 1992, pp. 367 and 371 for Brabantine *collationes* in Ruusbroec's milieu (for the manuscripts, see Warnar 1997b, p. 113, n. 47). In the *Dialog van meester Eckhart en de leek* (from Ruusbroec's time or even earlier), lay people say that if they 'appeared to be good, humble, pious people, they would gather and have *collationes* on divine things' (Schweitzer 1997, pp. 29/43–45). Given the position of the verses with respect to the main text of the *Realm*, we must seriously consider the possibility that the strophes were added later, as a 'user-friendly' gesture. Occasionally the verses follow a more general conclusion (*Realm* 1009–11, 1812–15 and esp. 2419–21). Moreover, in one instance they have been handed down separately from the text (Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 306).

⁹⁰ On Petrus van Huffel, see Lefèvre 1942, p. 220; Bonenfant-Feytmans 1949, pp. 27–31; Martens 1996. For the oldest manuscripts with excerpts from the *Realm*, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 34 and 75.

Renounce thyself in all respects,
 Know thyself, inwardly reflect,
 And cleave to God with perfect love.

*Vertijt uis selfs in allen dingen
 bekint u selven ende hout u binnen
 ende clevet aen gode met rechter minnen.*

The same lines conclude a sixteenth-century anthology from the *Realm*, whose strophic summaries closely resemble – in character, content and wording – rhyming passages from the compendium. This conglomeration of texts offers a noteworthy parallel to the *Realm* in subject, style and thought. Lists of the elements, the heavens and the choirs of angels recall the multiple frames of reference in Ruusbroec's first work – all the more so if one considers that successive chapters on the seven gifts were taken directly from the *Realm* and the later *Tabernacle*. In its concrete handling of the themes, the compendium falls short of the abstract appeal of the *Realm*, but it is not surprising that the sections of this compendium that were copied separately and passed down as individual tracts have sometimes been ascribed to Ruusbroec. Apart from the fact that it contains a few fragments from the *Realm*, no Middle Dutch work bears a closer resemblance to 'the first book he made', and equally remarkable is the fact that the dissemination of the texts from the compendium began in the same circles – pen-wielding priests, notaries and clerics – in which we first encounter the *Realm*. It was, after all, among the priests of the Church of St Gudula that Ruusbroec made his debut as an author.⁹¹

⁹¹ The oldest source of the compendium is MS. Brussels, Royal Library II 1039 (quotation of the verses on fol. 42r; regarding the excerpts from the *Realm* and the *Tabernacle*, see Lievens 1957b). Many of the texts in that compilation are included in MS. Cologne, Historisches Archiv G.B. Oct. 65 (see the description in Menne 1937, pp. 483–88). Cf. the rest of the quoted poem (Brussels, KB II 1039, fol. 43r): *En hebt niet eygens noch geen verkiesen Soe seldi winnen ende niet verliesen* (Keep nought for yourself and nothing choose/So you will win and never lose) with *Die levet sonder verkiesen Hi en mach niet verliesen* (He who lives and does not choose/Has not anything to lose) from the *Realm* (708–09). Earlier on in the manuscript (fol. 43r) there is a text that opens with the words 'What is God?' (*Wat es god*), which contains a phrase from the *Realm*: 'God is a pure spirit...from which all creatures have flowed and in which they have essentially remained' (*God es een puer geest...daer alle creatueren uutghevolten sijn ende weselec inbleven sijn*); cf. *Realm* 2270–71: 'And He is a richness out of which all creatures have flowed and in which they have essentially remained' (*Ende hi es een rijedom daer alle creatueren uut ghevloeten sijn ende weseleec in bleven sijn*). For sections of this compendium that have been handed down separately and ascribed to Ruusbroec, see Ampe 1952, pp. 254–80 and Beckers 1974, p. 307 (texts in the Brussels manuscript, fols. 94–100 and fols. 14–15, respectively).

CHAPTER II

THE *ESPOUSALS*

1. Bloemardinne and Beguine Mysticism

Less than two years after Ruusbroec had joined Jan Hinckaert's household in Brussels, a changing of the guard took place down the street. In 1305 Hedwig van Meerbeek, the leader of a small community of beguines, was forced to part with her possessions because she could no longer fulfil her financial obligations to the overseers of poor relief in the Chapter of St Gudula. Her place was taken by Heilwig Bloemaerts, the unmarried daughter of Brussels patricians, who was wealthy enough – probably since inheriting her father's fortune – to transform the destitute beguinage into a spiritual centre for women from the upper crust of society. Heilwig settled, together with her inseparable companion, her servant Machteld van Bigaarden, into Hedwig van Meerbeek's former quarters, and soon attracted a circle of high-born spinsters to keep her company. Heilwig energetically extended her domain by purchasing the adjacent houses, but eventually found herself, as her predecessor had done, in financial difficulties. When Heilwig drew up her will in 1335 – under the watchful eye of Jan Hinckaert – she was in debt to her heir, the chaplain Cornelis van Ninove. He continued Heilwig's work, and in his last will and testament, drawn up in the summer of 1357, he provided for the foundation of a Hospital of the Holy Trinity in the old beguinage, which was to offer shelter to twelve needy women. This appears to have been done in the name of Heilwig, for nearly twenty years later she was still being mentioned in archival documents as the pious founder of the hostel.¹

Anyone knowing no more than this when beholding the statue of Ruusbroec, unveiled in 1917 in the ambulatory of the Church of St Gudula, will wonder what possessed the sculptor to portray the partly crushed head of Heilwig Bloemaerts under the mystic's foot. Here, however, it is not the historical Heilwig who comes to grief, but the

¹ For the history of Heilwig's house, see Martens 1990, pp. 18–29; see Axters 1964, col. 809, for the later mention of Heilwig.

legendary Bloemardinne, who was the mysterious protagonist in a much-discussed episode in the life of Ruusbroec, as told by Pomerius in *De origine*. Pomerius presented Bloemardinne as a heretical woman who had attracted many followers with her inflammatory writings on the pernicious heresy of the Free Spirit. She was revered posthumously as a saint. Lured by Bloemardinne's fame, cripples limped past her body as it lay in state, hoping to be cured of their ailments. Her followers included members of the highest social circles. The silver throne Bloemardinne occupied when writing or speaking in public was presented after her death to Marie d'Evreux, Duchess of Brabant. Only Jan van Ruusbroec recognised the errors of Bloemardinne's disciples, and he waged war against the 'hidden fallacy' (*verborghen valsheit*) of her teachings, with which she had deceived many under the pretext of being enlightened by the Holy Spirit.²

No other chapter of *De origine* has caused so much ink to flow – especially because various historians thought they recognised in Bloemardinne the poetess Hadewijch – a subject we will return to later. The story also raised doubts as to Pomerius's reliability as Ruusbroec's biographer. After it had been established (in 1905) that Pomerius must have meant Heilwig Bloemaerts when referring to the woman popularly known as Bloemardinne, the Brussels city archivist Placide Lefèvre was the first (in 1933) to point out the inconsistencies between the reports of Heilwig's devotion in the historical documents and her supposed fanaticism as related in *De origine*. Lefèvre, a right-minded historian, chose to rely on the unambiguous archival documents rather than the tale told by Pomerius, which he dismissed as a hagiographic fabrication. The archivist seemed to have right on his side. Further research led to the verdict that Pomerius had retrospectively projected the religious perils of his own day on the life of Ruusbroec. In *De origine* Bloemardinne and her disciples were portrayed as the precursors of a heretical movement that shook the foundations of religious life in Brussels around 1410. Pomerius was hoping in this way to dispel all doubt about Ruusbroec's orthodoxy by showing that the mystic had fought a lonely battle against still-uneradicated errors.³

² Verdeyen 1981b, p. 139 (De Leu 1885, p. 286).

³ The identification of Bloemardinne as Heilwig Bloemaerts is to be found in Ruelens 1905. The piece must have dated from much earlier. See Van Even 1894, which contains a reaction to Ruelens. See also Knuttel 1916. Remarks from Lefèvre

Modern scholars united in relegating the whole Bloemardinne affair to the realm of fiction, calling it a perfect example of the twisting of facts of which Pomerius was often accused. Perhaps, though, Ruusbroec's biographer was judged too harshly for what was merely an allusion to current events. In fact, the case against Pomerius was not very strong to begin with. While it is true that Heilwig Bloemaerts emerges from the archives as a paragon of righteousness, business transactions do not reveal much about religious ideas and practices. For a proper understanding of the latter, we must explore the far-reaching consequences of her decision to take charge of a community of beguines. By doing so she frankly laid claim to a leading role in a religious culture long prone to tension, where matters soon came to a head.⁴

Since the establishment of the first beguinages in the early thirteenth century, these institutions had grown into centres of a specific kind of female spirituality. Many volumes have been written on the origin and attraction of this religious movement, but there is still no sound explanation for the blossoming of the beguines. Depending on whether more importance is attached to the spiritual or to the socio-historical aspect, historians see the beguines either as highly independent exponents of a unique religious life unfolding between the convent and the real world, or as women dependent on society to provide for their living arrangements. Both views are convincing. For many beguines, the idealistic principles of religious community life were a way of reconciling themselves to the drudgery of the handiwork they were compelled to do to earn a living. The women of the Wijngaard, the large beguinage in Brussels, were in fact indispensable to the local textile industry. Within the context of literary history, however, attention is understandably drawn to the small minority of passionate women devoted to their own brand of beguine spirituality, subtly but confidently claiming to be lovers of Christ – in contrast to the nuns, whose vows entitled them to be called His brides. The most famous of these mystical mistresses was Hadewijch, the author of a Middle Dutch oeuvre as expressive as it is

1933, pp. 395–98. On Pomerius's 'twisting of facts', see Janssens 1984. Cf. also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 16. The last to write on Bloemardinne and Hadewijch is Scheepsma 2000, pp. 671–75, who includes a list of the relevant literature.

⁴ Standard reference works on the beguines, their spirituality and their social context remain McDonnell 1954 and Grundmann 1961, recently supplemented by Simons 2001. See also the contributions in Wehrli-Johns & Opitz 1998 and in Dor 1999.



Fig. 2 Nineteenth-century statue in the Church of St Gudula (Brussels) portraying Ruusbroeck with his foot on the head of Bloemardinne.

daring, comprising visions, songs, epistles and poems, which sing the praises – in every imaginable key – of submission to divine love.⁵

To get some idea of the confusing situation prevailing around 1300, we must bear in mind both the social and the mystical component of ‘beguinedom’. The large, institutionalised communities of beguines were under the spiritual direction of chaplains or priests in monastic orders. The Cistercians at the Abbey of Sint-Bernardus-op-’t Schelt near Antwerp, for example, were entrusted with the pastoral care of the residents of the Wijngaard. Nevertheless, problems arose regarding

⁵ The most important recent overviews dealing with Hadewijch are Mommaers 1989; Wackers 1993; Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 158–232; McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 200–22; Fraeters 1999; Faesen 2000a; Scheepsma 2000. Regarding the writings of Hadewijch, see Willaert 1984 and Reynaert 1981a and 1994a.

small, elite communities, such as that of Heilwig Bloemaerts and her friends from the higher courtly and patrician circles. After all, it must have been the more cultured beguines who were suspected of engaging in theological discourse and fervent discussions about the nature of the Trinity and the Godhead. Ecclesiastical authorities feared that these *femmes savantes* were turning the beguinages into hotbeds of heresy. Proof of this was found in the *Miroir des simples âmes* (*Mirror of Simple Souls*), a book written by Marguerite Porete, a beguine from Valenciennes. A number of propositions singled out from this text – which did in fact look dubious out of context – were put before a board of academic theologians. Marguerite was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake on 1 June 1310.

This put the beguines in a bad light. Less than a year later it was decided by papal decree at the Council of Vienne that their orthodoxy should be examined. On the same occasion Pope Clement V signed the document that officially opened the hunt for heretics of the Free Spirit. Together these decrees, called *Clementines* after the pope who chaired the council, represented a turning point in the history of the beguines, for now their houses were officially branded as potential breeding grounds of Free Spirit heresy.

In Brussels the consequences of the *Clementines* were soon felt. By 1317 the Wijngaard was closed. The Bishop of Cambrai set up a committee to investigate the lifestyle and orthodoxy of the beguines. A statement issued in 1323 exonerated them of all blame: the bishop let it be known that the women had always obeyed their spiritual leaders and had steered clear of discussions and sermons regarding the Trinity and the Godhead. These were the standard expressions used in those years to affirm the orthodoxy of one beguinage after another. In spite of this, the beguines' position remained insecure, and it would be another ten years before the Wijngaard again opened its doors.⁶

Heilwig Bloemaerts succeeded in shielding her community from the scrutiny of the Brussels visiting committee. She avoided any association with beguinages, her strategy for survival being to draw as little attention to herself as possible. Although this magistrate's daughter, well known

⁶ An overview of the information on Marguerite Porete is to be found in Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 330–71 and McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 244–65. On the condemnation of beguines, see McDonnell 1954, pp. 521–38 and Lerner 1972, pp. 35–82. Regarding Brussels beguines, see Lefèvre 1942, pp. 112–13, and on the bishop's investigation of the Wijngaard, see McDonnell 1954, p. 541, n. 18.

in Brussels social circles, had been remarkably active in religious foundations, after 1316 the name Heilwig Bloemaerts no longer appears in archival documents. Despite this scrupulously observed silence, however, she retained her magnetism. Beguines banished from the Wijngaard sought the proximity of Bloemardinne, some finding shelter 'behind the Hospital of St Gudula', which was in the immediate vicinity of Heilwig's household and even closer to Jan Hinckaert's house, where the young Ruusbroec lived.⁷

These facts about the situation in Brussels shed new light on the story as related by Pomerius, making his assertions about the cult of Heilwig Bloemaerts seem considerably less fanciful. The unrest caused by the *Clementines* had set the local beguine population adrift under suspicion of inordinate mysticism. Some of the Wijngaard's residents sought refuge in the neighbourhood of Heilwig Bloemaerts, perhaps even in the houses she had purchased, so it would have been only natural for the Brussels beguines to view Bloemardinne as their protectress. This does not make her the heretic Pomerius took her to be, but it seems reasonable to assume that the neophyte Jan van Ruusbroec had his doubts about her activities. It seems highly likely, however, that it was Pomerius's exaggerated rhetoric that damaged Heilwig Bloemaert's good name. To be sure, he accused Bloemardinne of all kinds of wild fantasies, but he had to admit that he had been unable to detect 'her deceitfulness' (*haerder bedriechlycheit*) in Heilwig's writings.⁸

Thus the alleged dispute between Bloemardinne and Ruusbroec seems to have been merely a difference of opinion, but that does not make the issue any less enlightening as regards Ruusbroec's attitude towards beguine spirituality in general and the great writer Hadewijch in particular.

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The second edition of Hadewijch's works, which appeared in 1905, contained a posthumously published study by Charles Ruelens titled 'Jan van Ruysbroek en Blomardinne'. Ruelens began by discussing the archival documents that had led him to conclude that Heilwig

⁷ Martens 1990, p. 62. Where the evicted beguines took refuge is discussed in Bonenfant 1965, p. 110, n. 1, based on a Brussels document of 1328: 'retro hospitale beate Gudile...domus...ubi beghine quondam manserunt;...ubi beghine manere solebant prope domum Praedicatorum;...manens quondam cum Yda de Ponte Navium beghina, retro hospitale beate Gudile'.

⁸ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 139 (De Leu 1885, p. 286).

Bloemaerts was the dangerous woman mentioned in *De origine*. He then ventured to identify her writings, as reported by Pomerius, ending up with ‘three manuscripts containing very exceptional pieces of prose and poetry, without a general title, and typically written by a woman’. Ruelens was referring to the work of Hadewijch. It was not just the name of the poetess that led him to believe he had discovered the oeuvre of Heilwig Bloemaerts. Ruelens quoted all manner of passages in which Ruusbroec, in his view, had sensed the teachings of the Free Spirit.⁹

Ruelens was chastised by Jozef van Mierlo, later one of the founders of the Ruusbroec Society, about whom it must first be said – in order to understand what follows – that he was too great an admirer of Hadewijch to toe the scholarly line. Deeply convinced of her artistic genius, Van Mierlo developed over the course of his career as a literary historian an authoritative yet personal view of her, and did his utmost to preserve it from attack. Ruelens’s hypothesis, by contrast, found no favour whatsoever. In no fewer than eleven articles, published over a twenty-five year period, Van Mierlo fought every suggestion that Hadewijch was the woman suspected of heresy. His argumentation was far from unassailable. For some points he put forward convincing arguments, but as a rule his objections were not solid enough to refute Ruelens’s sound reasoning. Leafing through the literature, one is struck by the curious results of Van Mierlo’s persuasiveness and quickly acquired authority. As Hadewijch’s champion, he encountered no opposition for many years. Only very recently have Ruelens’s findings cautiously been given new credence.¹⁰

Viewed matter of factly, his identification of Heilwig Bloemaerts with Hadewijch was quite reasonable. They had the same Christian name, and there were simply not that many women writing in Middle Dutch. Anyone looking for the writings of Bloemardinne would most likely stumble upon the works of Hadewijch. This was as true of Ruelens at the end of the nineteenth century as it was of Pomerius in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. There is every reason to assume that Ruusbroec’s biographer portrayed Bloemardinne, with her reputation as a saint, on the basis of what could then be discovered of Hadewijch – for example, in the writings of Ruusbroec’s pupil Jan van Leeuwen,

⁹ Ruelens 1905, quotation on p. XLIX.

¹⁰ For a conclusive article regarding this question, see Van Mierlo 1933, with mention of previous publications on p. 308, n. 4. See, recently, Scheepsma 2000. Regarding Van Mierlo and Hadewijch, see Warnar 2003.

the cook of Groenendaal, who spoke of ‘the good saint Hadewijch’ (*die goede sancte Hadewijch*). He had great respect for the writings of this ‘saintliest of women’ (*overheilich wijf*), although, he admitted, it was not easy to appreciate their true value: ‘For the teachings of Hadewijch are too exalted and subtly hidden (*te edele ende subtijlic verborghen*) for those who are not touched by the pure countenance of divine love.’ The credulous cook trusted Hadewijch’s reliability, but the dark language of her texts could easily arouse suspicion.¹¹

If Pomerius therefore took Hadewijch and Heilwig to be one and the same person, it seems to have been not so much historical error as sound conjecture, for which solid arguments can still be given. The biggest objection, however, remains the dating of Hadewijch’s activities, commonly assigned since Van Mierlo to the mid-thirteenth century. The basis for this is a vague reference to persons mentioned in the enigmatic List of the Perfect – meaning the elect of past, present and future – which Hadewijch draws up in an appendix to her *Visioenen* (*Visions*). This curious piece of writing is not a very solid basis for a dating, however, and its credibility pales when one considers that the oldest surviving codex containing Hadewijch’s collected oeuvre was produced around the mid-fourteenth century, roughly one hundred years later than Van Mierlo’s presumed date of origin. The silence in the intervening years has considerably magnified the mystery of Hadewijch as a person: how could this exceptional woman not leave a trace? The problem is easily solved if we take Hadewijch to be Heilwig Bloemaerts’s alter ego, giving the enigmatic poetess a history and allowing us to link the origin of the Hadewijch manuscripts to the death of Bloemardinne in 1335.

The manuscript tradition of Hadewijch’s texts is concentrated in Brussels. This is sometimes explained by the religious fervour surrounding Ruusbroec; in his immediate circle, however, the beguine’s subtle poetic art must have been particularly well received at the house of Heilwig Bloemaerts. What the occupants of that house had in common with Hadewijch was a courtly and patrician cultural background,

¹¹ Axters 1940, p. 42, n. 1: ‘Want Haywichs leeringhe es in vele steden alle menschen te edele ende te subtijlic verborghen die in bloeten aenschijn der godliker minnen niet en gheraken.’ The introduction to a fourteenth-century German compilation of Hadewijch’s works speaks of ‘St Hadewijch... who is a great saint in eternity’ (*sante Adelwijp... die do ist ein grosze heilige in dem ewigen lebende*). This was last commented upon in Scheepsma 2000, p. 678.

where we find the musical examples for her strophic songs. Thematically these texts were also made to order, so to speak, for Heilwig and her housemates. As mystical lovers, they had converted to a form of religious life outside the sphere of vow-taking and the convent, where one could, after all, be considered a bride in a mystic marriage.¹²

All these considerations invite us to identify Heilwig Bloemaerts with Hadewijch. Those embracing Ruelens's theory, however, will be forced to subject the history of medieval Dutch literature to drastic revision, causing, for instance, Maerlant (and his verse translation of the Bible into Dutch) to precede Hadewijch by many years. Yet that new chronology is less unsettling than the perspective from which we would be forced to view Hadewijch and Ruusbroec. Many a scholar still eagerly entertains the idea of a harmonious world of Dutch mysticism, in which Ruusbroec, with the scholastic prose of his *Espousals*, systematically developed what the poetically more talented Hadewijch had brilliantly demonstrated. This peaceful coexistence is shattered if it is historically true that Ruusbroec criticised, in the person of Bloemardinne, the greatest female author of Middle Dutch literature.

Final judgement cannot be passed on the true identity of Hadewijch and Heilwig Bloemaerts, but even if Pomerius is guilty of (wilfully?) mistaking their identities, it cannot be denied that Ruusbroec had his doubts about the beguines and their mystical books. Even assuming his judgement had not been swayed by the *Clementines* – which forced the Wijngaard to close its doors – the reports about Marguerite Porete, burned as a heretic, no doubt gave him much to think about. Later, in *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec would roundly reject the theories for which she had been condemned.¹³

Ruusbroec had more admiration for Hadewijch, but not so much that her texts made him change his mind about his mystical teachings. Her influence was confined to the language of mysticism. Ruusbroec found his bearings in Hadewijch's vocabulary, her figures of speech and the imagery she used to express in Dutch her intense longing for God. But while his texts are imbued with her language, Ruusbroec was too much of a theologian to surrender to the capricious world of emotions, revelations and desire about which Hadewijch wrote so exaltedly. Typical of Ruusbroec's distance is his opinion of mystical

¹² Regarding the arguments for and against a late dating, see Scheepsma 2000 (with addendum). On the dating of the manuscripts, see Kwakkel 1999.

¹³ Verdeyen 1992; cf. Burger 1993, pp. 36–37.

passion, the ‘impetuosity of love’ (*orewoet van minnen*). For Hadewijch this state of mind, which moved the soul by turns to desperation and ecstasy, was inalienably bound up with submission to God. Ruusbroec’s description of it is completely different, yet his words are so highly reminiscent of Hadewijch’s that he must have drawn upon her understanding of *orewoet*. Even more significant, however, is Ruusbroec’s remark that those who surrender to *orewoet* put their health at risk. He talks about an affliction (*quale*) that will grow worse until one’s bodily nature ‘withers and dries up’. Ruusbroec’s fear that this disorder could be fatal was not unfounded. The Middle Dutch translation of the *vita* of Lutgard van Tongeren relates that this mystic nun was so overcome by ‘great impetuosity’ (*groten orewoede*) that a blood vessel near her heart burst and she started to bleed profusely. These words must not be taken literally, but to the medieval mind it was perfectly normal to view mystical rapture as a pathological condition. It is revealing that Ruusbroec uses the terminology of medical treatises to compare the side effects of *orewoet* with fevers; indeed, for him it was a state more physical than mental.¹⁴

Hadewijch’s call to surrender oneself to *orewoet* was, however, considerably less alarming than what she claimed to experience in her visions. Hadewijch recounted that she had been assumed into the heavenly spheres as the bride of Jesus and the equal of Mary, who welcomed her as a perfect being. Such utterances were downright disturbing. The followers of the Free Spirit were, after all, condemned for claiming to live on earth in a state of perfection that relieved them of the usual duty to practise virtue. In the days of the *Clementines*, Hadewijch’s statements were grist to the mill of those who mistrusted mystical beguines.

¹⁴ Quotation from the *Espousals* b611–14: ‘The affliction increases for such a long (time) that he withers and dries up in his bodily nature like the trees in a hot land; and he dies in the impetuosity of love’ (*Soe langhe meeret die quale dat die mensche ane der lijflijcker natueren verdorret ende verdroocht, rechte also die boome in heeten lande; ende hi steruet in woede van minnen*). See the *Espousals* b771–888 on humours and fevers. Regarding Lutgard, see Gysseling 1980–87, vol. V, verses 7065–67 and 7109–14. On *orewoet*, see Axters 1950–60, vol. II, p. 272; Reynaert 1981a, pp. 377–81; Reynaert 1981b, p. 217; Mommaers 1989, pp. 134–38; Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 151–52 and 178–79. On desire in the work of Hadewijch, see Faesen 2000a, who objects (p. 316) to the notion that Hadewijch’s desire should be seen wholly or even mainly as a bodily affliction. He is reacting to modern literature, however, not to Ruusbroec’s position. Cf. in general Elliot 1997. Reynaert 1981b puts the relationship between Hadewijch and Ruusbroec into perspective in a sober and sensible manner, giving as well a summary of the older literature (pp. 193–202).

It is no wonder that Ruusbroec exercised a great deal of restraint, particularly in the matter of visions. In his view, those living ‘in the tempestuousness of love’ (*in woede van minnen*) are sometimes instructed in their dreams by angels. (Hadewijch was accompanied by an angel when she experienced her first vision.) Less exalted people might have visions as well, but these are just as likely to be the promptings of the devil as the inspiration of the good angel. Therefore, Ruusbroec advises, one would do well to determine to what extent these thoughts are in keeping with ‘Holy Scripture’ (*der heyligher scriftueren*), for those who attach more value to it are easily deceived.¹⁵

There is much more to be said on the relations between Hadewijch and Ruusbroec than the preceding – and admittedly brief – speculations. Simply presented as two sides in a debate on affectivity versus intellect, their works cannot be analysed with a thematic depth that does justice to their positions in the history of mysticism. Their relationship is as complicated as one would expect of two minds that – although bound by a fascination for the divine – remained separated by the two great cultural divides of the Middle Ages: male versus female and clergy versus laity. The oeuvres of Ruusbroec and Hadewijch are now considered monuments of Middle Dutch literature, but this nearly sacred status should not blind us to the fact that their historical selves related to one another as priest and beguine.

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Only two of Ruusbroec’s texts – the first and the last – contain the word beguine. In the *Realm* the beguine – together with her male counterpart, the beghard, as well as the ‘grey sister’ (*sweyster*) associated with their circles – was included in the category of people who feign pioussness ‘for the sake of being called holy or for temporal gain’. It is possible that the commotion caused by Bloemardinne was still too fresh in Ruusbroec’s mind to allow for more balanced judgement. For this we must wait for the rhymed opening of his opus *On the Twelve Beguines*.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Esposals* b572–91. Regarding Hadewijch and the angel, see Dros & Willaert 1996 (*Visioen* 1/29–30). On the problematic nature of Hadewijch’s visions in the historical context, see Warnar 1998.

¹⁶ *Realm* 420 (‘om heylich gheheeten te sine ofte om eertsche ghewin’) and *Beguines* 1/1–141. Concerning this section of the text, see Epiney-Burgard 1984 and Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 371.

In his last work Ruusbroec finally examines what had moved Hadewijch and the beguines to the depths of their souls. It is a curious piece of writing in a form completely different from Ruusbroec's other texts – and not only because it was written in verse. The author introduces his *dramatis personae*, twelve beguines in speaking roles:

Twelve beguines sat at one time,
speaking of the Lord sublime.
Each in thought did ponder:
'Love we praise with all our might!
In the beginning a delight,
and exceeding tender.'

*Het saten XII beghinen
ende spraken omme her Jhesuse den finen
ieghewelc in haer ghedachte:
'Nu prisen wij die minne!
Sy es suete inden beghinne
Ende utermaten saechte.'*¹⁷

The group discussion thus introduced concerns the joys and sorrows of loving Christ. The first beguine states: 'I want to bear Jesus' love' (*Jesus minne willic draghen*). The second agrees with this, but is unsure how to go about it: 'I should gladly love Him, if I only knew how to begin' (*Ik souden gherne minnen, Wistics hoe beghinnen*). The third has personal experience of her heavenly lover: 'He came to me as though he were a saint and proposed lovely things to me' (*Hi quam te my ocht ware een sant ende leyt my scone te voren*). The fourth, who feels deceived by Jesus' love, says '[my] heart and senses were snatched from me' (*herte ende zinne es my onthoghen*). The fifth corrects her friend, however: 'I would be wrong if I complained that my reward was not paid in advance' (*Ik hadde onrecht, woudics my belghen, dat men mijne miede te voren niet en wilt ghelden*). They go on like this, alternately extolling Jesus as the source of all joy and giving vent to corollary feelings of despair, as well as discussing other motifs related to the mystical love of Christ. Finally, the beguines express their desire to remain together 'and speak always of heavenly things: that is a noble life' (*ende spreken altoes van hemelschen dinghen; dat es een edel leven*).¹⁸

After letting the beguines have their say, Ruusbroec takes the floor himself. Continuing in verse, he sets forth his ideas about the future path

¹⁷ *Beguines* 1–6.

¹⁸ *Beguines* 8, 15–16, 22–23, 32, 38–39, 106–07.

to be followed by the beguines, whose heyday, in his view, is long past. The ideals they first upheld have been corrupted by internal disputes and discord. But Ruusbroec's orthodox beguines are of the old school; they set a good example by praising love.

This dialogue is a curious interlude in Ruusbroec's oeuvre as a whole, but its mood is in keeping with contemporary beguine literature from the north of present-day France, part of which then belonged – as did Brussels – to the Bishopric of Cambrai. Such texts as the *Rigle des fins amans* (*Rule of Pure Lovers*) explain how Jesus wants to be loved purely (*finement*) and how beguines – more than anyone else – are blessed with the requisite qualities and attitude to life. Ruusbroec subscribes to this idea, although he feels no real affinity with these mystical mistresses. By letting the beguines speak for themselves, Ruusbroec distances himself from their views in a way that would probably be considered ironical in the case of a less exalted subject. What the beguines have on their minds testifies to their complete devotion to 'Jesus the sublime' (*Jesus den finen*), even though it sounds almost touchingly naive next to the learned Trinitarian theology with which Ruusbroec regaled the reader of the *Realm*.

In Ruusbroec's day most clerics regarded beguine spirituality with an amiable condescension that stemmed from their intellectual approach to religion. Some were gripped by such exalted female spirituality, while others remained critical, patronising or slightly ambivalent: 'This art has risen up in our day among women in Brabant and Bavaria. Lord God, what kind of art is this which an old crone understands better than a learned man?' This utterance of the German Franciscan Lamprecht of Regensburg, which is often quoted as evidence of admiration for beguines, has also been interpreted as disparagement – the sarcastic words of a scholar who considered himself a master of mystical philosophy. The same ambiguity resounds in the words Ruusbroec puts into the mouths of his beguines. He is sympathetic to their good intentions, but the playful opening of the *Beguines* is too light-hearted to read actual commitment into it.¹⁹

¹⁹ Quotation of Lamprecht of Regensburg: 'diu kunst ist bí unsern tagen / in Bráabant und in Baierlanden / unter wiben úf gestanden / Herre Got, waz kunst is daz / daz sich ein alt wip baz / verstét dan witzige man?' (taken from McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 174 and 406, where the possibly satirical interpretation is also discussed). On the condescending attitude towards beguines, see Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1999. Regarding beguine literature, see Peters 1988, pp. 81–89 and Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 366–71. The *Rigle des fins amans* is edited in Christ 1927.

Interpreting the opening of the Beguines in this way could prompt us to play down the importance of Ruusbroec's bone-picking with Bloemardinne. Heilwig Bloemaerts was an exponent of a religious movement that reached its peak in the thirteenth century and had been fading in importance ever since. Ruusbroec was only sixteen when Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake, and the *Clementines* did little to enhance the beguines' reputation. The difference of opinion between Ruusbroec the chaplain and the much older Bloemardinne was a generational conflict which is mainly of symbolic importance. Seen from the wider perspective of medieval mysticism, a change in leadership was in the offing. The enraptured women who had given free rein to their emotions were about to be followed by the clerics with their scholarly opinions.

2. A Chaplain at the Church of St Gudula

When Ruusbroec arrived in Brussels, builders had been working for years on an extension to the old Church of St Gudula. In the first quarter of the thirteenth century, workers had begun to tear down, bit by bit, the existing Romanesque basilica and to replace it with the 'new edifice' (*nuwe werck*) of the Gothic church. Around 1300 the choir and the south transept were finished. While a schoolboy, Ruusbroec saw the completion of a richly decorated rood loft that separated the presbytery – the domain of the clergy – from the church. In the years of his priesthood, the bays of the nave were erected, but the fifteenth century was well under way before the prestigious project was brought to a close. More than once, the builders of St Gudula's were confronted with a shortage of funds that forced them to call a temporary halt to construction. Additional money was then drummed up by a kind of trading in religious shares, in which special indulgences could be obtained in exchange for donations to the basilica building fund.²⁰

The improvements made to the collegiate church during Ruusbroec's lifetime are better documented than his position there. On the list of Groenendaal canons, Ruusbroec figures as *capellanus beneficiatus* of the Church of St Gudula, with no mention of which chapel he served or

²⁰ On the history of the construction of, and improvements made to, the Church of St Gudula, see De Ridder 1992, pp. 41–55 and Henne & Wauters 1845, vol. III, pp. 244–53. See Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 226–27, in connection with Ruusbroec.

why the benefice had been conferred on him. Exhaustive research carried out in the archives of the Brussels Chapter of St Gudula yielded no additional information. The most recent attempt to identify the mystic as a chaplain is based on a letter of recommendation for the chaplaincy of St Jodocus in Ter Hulpen, founded by the Brussels knight Arnoldus of IJse. In 1317 his son-in-law, Alexander of Rampemont, drew the attention of the Chapter of St Gudula to one 'Jan, a priest, who leads an exemplary life devoted to his fellow men, and is virtuous and praiseworthy in his manner'. Ruusbroec certainly merits this testimonial – though these qualities were generally considered prerequisites for anyone aspiring to the position of priest at a collegiate church. Moreover, the document's date makes any connection with the mystic unlikely. Ruusbroec was not ordained as a priest until 1318, upon reaching the required age of twenty-five. Then again, this obstacle would explain why the nomination did not result in an appointment, since it is indeed conceivable that Ruusbroec was proposed for the chaplaincy of St Jodocus. The Brussels chapter was looking for a successor to Johannes van Meerbeke, a priest who, remarkably enough, bore the same surname as the Rich Clare Margriet, whom Ruusbroec addresses as his sister in *On the Seven Enclosures*.

Family relations of this kind often played a role in the appointment of chaplains, which is one reason why, in connection with Ruusbroec's benefice, it has also been pointed out that in 1320 a sister of Vranke vanden Coudenberg, Aleyde Uutten Steenwege, founded an altar in St Gudula's in honour of John the Baptist, later the patron saint of Groenendaal. (Vranke, it will be remembered, was one of the co-founders of the priory.) However, according to the foundation charter of the altar, the priest who was granted the benefice was one Jan Muers.²¹

Here, too, Ruusbroec seems to have missed the boat, but there must have been subsequent opportunities to receive a benefice. Since the thirteenth century numerous Brussels burghers and clerics had made donations to have masses read to honour a certain saint or to ensure

²¹ For the mention of Ruusbroec as *capellanus beneficiatus*, see Dykmans 1940, p. 6. See Lefèvre 1933, pp. 391–93 and Axters 1964, cols. 807–08, about Ruusbroec's ecclesiastical office, Denayer 1985 regarding the chapel of St Jodocus, and Marchal 1999–2000, vol. II, p. 10, on the qualities necessary for ecclesiastical office. Reypens 1932b, p. 228, n. 2, on Ruusbroec and the Chapel of St John the Baptist. On Jan Muers's chaplaincy, see Van Paris 1957–71, p. 648, with reference to Henne & Wauters 1845, vol. III, pp. 213 and 243. See Martens 1990, p. 78, on the family ties between Aleyde and Vranke.

their own salvation. The canons in charge of the chapter pursued an active acquisitions policy. When large-scale improvements were made to St Gudula's, the master-builders deliberately created room for chapels and altars, which not only boosted the church's prestige but also served as an important source of income. In 1289 the Collegiate Church of St Gudula had only thirteen chaplains; by 1370, the choir of the church and both sides of the nave contained thirty-two altars served by forty-nine chaplains.²²

Ruusbroec joined the fastest growing group of professionals in the ecclesiastical establishment of the late Middle Ages, but the position of the chaplains was not very promising. Badly paid, called upon only to read the daily masses for the souls of the dead, and lacking any voice in chapter matters, many chaplains led miserable, isolated lives. The true lords and masters of the church were the canons, who had originally been appointed to add lustre to the performance of the liturgical ceremony. In late-medieval practice these wealthy clerics occupied themselves primarily with running the chapter and administering its property. Saturdays saw the weekly meeting of the canons, who in the Collegiate Church of St Gudula had traditionally been divided into the College of Major Canons and the College of Minor Canons. The chaplains, although united in their own body corporate, had no say whatsoever. They were salaried employees of the collegiate church, which – as the owner of the chapels – pocketed most of the revenues.

While canons had elegant homes built in the vicinity of collegiate churches, chaplains who could not make ends meet were forced to offer their services elsewhere – at vigils and burials, for instance, where it was customary to remunerate the priests in attendance. Such 'work' did little to enhance their esteem: according to the Ypres physician-poet Jan de Weert, a contemporary of Ruusbroec, a chaplain who attended a death-bed was only after a share of the inheritance.²³

Ruusbroec was well aware of the often hopeless situation in which his colleagues found themselves. 'It is certainly permitted in the Holy Church for poor priests and clerics who read and sing, and serve God and man with the sacraments, to hire out and sell their labour and

²² On the chaplains of St Gudula, see De Ridder 1987–88, pp. 40–43 and Lefèvre 1942, pp. 49–52; their numbers are mentioned on p. 51, n. 1.

²³ On chaplains in general and their position, see Rapp 1993, Avril 1993 and Derville 1989; for Jan de Weert, see Jacobs 1915, verses 396–98.

their service, and to live from it.²⁴ As a hired priest (vicaris), Ruusbroec himself had started out at the lowest level in the chapter's hierarchy. He had seen at first hand how the lower clergy fared, but this does not mean that the mystic continued to spend his days on the margins of church life. Sheltered by the Hinckaert family from an early age, Ruusbroec was probably not forced to live on a meagre benefice. Jan Hinckaert is portrayed by Pomerius as a wealthy man, 'powerful and rich in goods' (*mechtich ende rijk van goede*), who possessed, in addition to a substantial inheritance, many 'religious goods' (*kerkelycs goets*), that is to say, possessions related to his ecclesiastical function. Chaplains, therefore, were not by definition poor. Vranke vanden Coudenberg was living proof that there were social climbers among the lower clergy. When Coudenberg returned to Brussels, having finished his university training by obtaining a master's degree, he served in 1319 as chaplain of the St Lawrence Chapel. He soon worked his way up to the College of Minor Canons. Pomerius describes him as a well-to-do priest, who had become 'very rich from his inheritance' (*seer rijk was van patrimonien*). It is conceivable, however, that Pomerius exaggerated the wealth of Ruusbroec's friends. By stressing the easy circumstances in which Hinckaert and Coudenberg lived, he heightened the dramatic effect of their conversion to apostolic poverty. Still, there is no reason to think that the cupboard was always bare in the Hinckaert household. Pomerius also relates that the three clerics living there continued to keep servants until their departure for Groenendaal.²⁵

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Of the scant sources that can be called upon to confirm Ruusbroec's chaplaincy, the prologue written by Brother Gerard offers the most information. The mystic was first 'a devout priest and a chaplain at the Church of St Gudula in Brussels in Brabant, where he began to make some of these books'.²⁶ This, too, provides only the briefest of

²⁴ *Beguïnes* 2b/1503–06: 'Het is wel gheoerloeft in die heilige kercke dat arm priesteren ende cleerken die lesen ende singhen gode ende den menschen dienen metten sacramenten, dat si haren arbeyt ende hueren dienst verhueren ende vercoopen moghen ende daer ave leven.'

²⁵ On Vranke's chaplaincy, see Martens 1990, p. 76. For Pomerius's quotations on Hinckaert, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 123 and 125; p. 127 on domestic staff (*De Leu* 1885, pp. 271, 272 and 274).

²⁶ *De Vreese* 1895, pp. 8/7–9: 'een devoet priester ende een capelaen te Bruesel in Brabant in sinte Goedelen kerke; ende daer begonste hi enighe van desen boeke te maken'.

statements. Convinced that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was of decisive importance for the *Espousals*, Brother Gerard saw no reason to delve into Ruusbroec's other activities. Anyone viewing the mystic's books against the backdrop of his circumstances, however, cannot fail to detect several things that require an explanation.

No other chaplain or secular priest made as substantial a contribution to medieval mystical literature as Jan van Ruusbroec. Contemplation of the divine was largely a form of monastic spirituality. Abbeys and monasteries, with their hallowed atmosphere of prayer and group study, were much more conducive to contemplation than a collegiate church – especially one covered in scaffolding. Other prominent mystical writers of Ruusbroec's time – such as the Dominicans Eckhart, Tauler and Seuse – received a thorough education within their order. Compared with these well-schooled preachers, Ruusbroec had been left to his own devices, yet he did not live in intellectual isolation. Brussels was a lively city full of academically trained clerics and learned mendicants. A few streets away from Hinckaert's house, the confraternity of the *clerici parisienses* met in the chapel of the former convent of the Friars of the Sack (*Saccati*). Master Vranke vanden Coudenberg was possibly one of their members, although it is not certain that Ruusbroec's companion obtained his academic degree in Paris. It was thanks to people like Coudenberg, however, that the mystic was kept abreast of developments at the universities. From the *Espousals*, at least, we may conclude that Ruusbroec was well enough informed to speak out on a matter of controversy among scholars who maintained that there was more to be said about God than the fact *that* He exists – *quod est* – and were so bold as to speculate about *what* God is – *quid est*. Ruusbroec wanted to have nothing to do with such philosophising about *quidditas*: 'God's whatness' (*de watheit gods*), he wrote, 'transcends all creatures' (*onthoghet alle creatueren*).²⁷

This remark is typical of Ruusbroec's ambivalence towards scholarship. He was sufficiently familiar with theology to invent Dutch alternatives for Latin scholastic terminology, but at the same time he abhorred philosophical hardliners who were 'very subtle' (*herde subtyl*) in choosing their words and 'skilful in showing lofty things'. Through their clever fabrications they fell victim to intellectual pride. Ruusbroec expressly contrasts such know-it-all's with those enlightened by God, who – thanks to 'an infused wisdom' (*eene inghestorte wijsheit*) – recognise the

²⁷ See *Espousals* 727–32. See Aertsen 2001 regarding the Parisian discussion.

truth without intellectual exertion. This in itself was not an unusual standpoint. That the human intellect was incapable of understanding the great mysteries of the divine was an opinion that many people in the mystical world shared with Ruusbroec. It is, however, remarkable to hear this view of the fruitless struggle of scholars from an author who in the rest of his text applies with virtuoso skill the scholarly nomenclature of the Trinitarian doctrine current at the time.²⁸

Dutch authors in Ruusbroec's days sometimes launched attacks on professional academics, in which they voiced substantive criticism, frequently betraying resentment of mendicant friars and the well-schooled elite of the secular clergy. Their superior education ingratiated them with secular government, enabling them to snap up attractive posts from under the noses of what were sometimes rather resentful writers, such as Maerlant the sexton or Boendale the magistrates' clerk. The professional jealousy that could occasionally be heard in their criticism of the mendicant orders was probably felt to some extent by the chaplain Ruusbroec. He frequently sensed the distance between himself and the intellectual elite of Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites, who often preached at the city's churches, hospitals and large beguinages. They did this with the approval of the all-powerful canons of St Gudula's, whereas Ruusbroec and the other chaplains, who were excluded from all pastoral duties, were barred from preaching, hearing confession, imposing penance or administering any of the sacraments except the Eucharist, which was part of the Office of the Dead recited daily by the chaplains.²⁹

The seemingly endless recitation of the prayers of the liturgical rites and ceremonies became for many clerics a tedious routine. 'They pray with their lips, but the heart does not savour what is spoken about', wrote Ruusbroec in the *Espousals*, adding that his less impassioned colleagues were denied 'the secret marvel that is hidden in scripture and in the sacraments and in their office'. Apparently the far-reaching restrictions placed on his powers in no way diminished the fulfilment Ruusbroec derived from his post as chaplain. The most important thing, in his eyes, was to find himself daily before God's altar and His countenance in the higher spheres of the liturgy, with the Eucharist as

²⁸ See *Espousals* b1223–61: 'herde subtijl sijn van woorden ende behendich te bewisene hoghe dinghe'. On Ruusbroec's terminology, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 68–69.

²⁹ See Lefèvre 1942, p. 50, on the chaplains' limited duties; regarding the contribution of the mendicant orders to sermons, see p. 191 and Verjans 1952. See Warnar 2002a, pp. 43–44, on Middle Dutch criticism of the clergy.

the climax. In the *Espousals* Ruusbroec dealt at length with the Holy Sacrament as a 'special gem' in which Christ gave Himself. The consecration of the bread that is transsubstantiated into Christ's body was the supreme manifestation of His presence – with Holy Communion as a form of corporeal union, which in medieval spirituality often led to scenes of intense rapture. Ruusbroec was extremely sensitive to the mystical connotations of the Holy Sacrament, but he regarded the eucharistic ceremony from the perspective of the priest: 'Now Christ wishes us to commemorate Him as often as we consecrate, offer and receive His body.'³⁰

Ruusbroec's chaplaincy exerted a decided influence on his intellectual and spiritual life, but how it affected his writing is difficult to determine, apart from his reverence for the Eucharist. The same problem arises with respect to the social significance attached to Ruusbroec's benefice. One is disinclined, with a subject as lofty as that of the *Espousals*, to ponder the material constraints on medieval literary life, but writing – in whatever genre – was a costly business. Just as a shortage of funds brought the construction of St Gudula's to a halt, authors were sometimes forced to interrupt their writing because they could not afford parchment and ink – or even food. In the fourteenth century, those with literary ambitions had to be well placed socially – or else seek a position that could be combined with writing.

Positions in the town clerk's office or the court chancellery generally offered good prospects. Professional scribal work naturally had a literary component. The Antwerp magistrates' clerk Boendale is proof that one could combine literary pursuits and administrative duties. More often, though, an author who held a clerical post had a better chance of making a substantial contribution to literature. For various Middle Dutch authors, the ideal position was the office of chaplain, parish priest or sexton, since this enabled them to make writing the main activity of their day. Important contributions to medieval Dutch literature were made by the sexton Jacob van Maerlant, the parish priest Lodewijk van Velthem and the court chaplain Dirc van Delft, all working in spheres in which the ecclesiastical and the secular worlds interacted. The most precious gem to come out of this sphere is undoubtedly *The Spiritual*

³⁰ *Espousals* b1342–44 ('dat heimelijcke wonder dat inder screftueren ende inden sacramenten ende in haren ambachte verborghen es'), b1307–10 ('Nu wilt Cristus dat wij sijns ghedincken alsoe dicke alsoe wij sinen lichame consacrerren, offeren ende ontfaen selen') and 1324 ('zonderlinghe cleynode'). See also V/2.



Fig. 3 Priest celebrating the Eucharist. Historiated initial in a 14th-century Brussels manuscript.

Espousals, written by Jan van Ruusbroec when he was affiliated with the Collegiate Church of St Gudula.³¹

There Ruusbroec could benefit from the patronage of the upper crust of Brussels society, who not only helped to finance convents, chapels and the construction of churches, but also looked kindly upon vernacular literature. A prominent figure in this world was the Brussels nobleman Rogier van Leefdale, who contributed to the costs of various altars in the Church of St Gudula, and even had a separate chapel built for his own chaplain, Petrus van Huffel, who also acted as town clerk. Leefdale and his wife were known as devotees of literature. Jan van Boendale dedicated *Der leken spiegel* (*The Layman's Mirror*) to them in full confidence that they would 'derive joy from literature' (*in die scripture hebben jolijt*). There is nothing to suggest that the Leefdales' interests extended to the mystical works of their fellow townsman Ruusbroec, but it is not far-fetched to suppose that he shared in the favours bestowed by Leefdale or other religious benefactors.³²

As regards the literary-historical context of the *Espousals*, however, Ruusbroec's possible patrons were less important than his kindred spirits and confrères. As a chaplain he belonged to the intellectual middle class of clerics – consisting further of canons, jurists, schoolmasters and friars – to whom the flowering of Middle Dutch literature at this time was indebted. These assorted literati were well acquainted, through their offices and education, with the predominantly Latin culture of the scholarly elite, at the same time remaining in touch – through their activities at the court chancellery, city magistracy, chapter or chapel – with the laity and the vernacular. By virtue of this intermediate position, they contributed in large measure to the migration of scientific knowledge to milieus outside the universities, where new forms of applied learning were emerging, especially in the vernacular. Trained friars and members of the secular clergy with an academic background fulfilled a key role in initiating a wide variety of activities outside academic circles. In the same overlapping area of science and society, schoolmasters, clerks,

³¹ On the social position of Middle Dutch poets, see Van Oostrom 1992, pp. 15–18. Cf. Warnar 1995a, pp. 156–68, Van Oostrom 1996a (Maerlant) and Hage 1994 (Velthem).

³² On Leefdale's religious donations, see Wauters 1855, vol. III, p. 328, with reference to Henne & Wauters 1845, vol. III, p. 247. On Petrus van Huffel, see Martens 1996. Concerning Leefdale's literary interest, see Warnar 2002a, pp. 34–35 and the literature mentioned there. On Ruusbroec's Brussels background in general, see Warnar 1997b and 1999a.

preachers and priests did their part to make Latin scholarship more accessible to vernacular audiences.³³

From these learned factions came the authors, scribes and readers who from the fourteenth century onwards made Middle Dutch literature self-supporting in both the ideological and the intellectual sense. The focal point of this development came to reside – after the determined efforts of Maerlant in Flanders – in the literature of Brabant. In Brussels and the surrounding area, Middle Dutch as a literary language flourished under successive dukes of Brabant, the high point being the reign of Jan III (1312–56). Boendale's *Der leken spiegel* was the first of a series of texts on ethics and life philosophy dedicated, directly or indirectly, to this duke.

When Ruusbroec began some time later on his *Espousals*, the reception of texts written in his mother tongue was very favourable indeed. The fact that a mystical branch of Middle Dutch literature had already been formed is equally significant. If the language of the texts does not deceive us (and if the chronology of the manuscripts offers a reliable basis), cautious Flemish beginnings were almost immediately inundated by a much stronger Brabant wave of mystical poetry and contemplative theology in sermons and prose. Much of this material is still buried in the manuscripts and – in the absence of accessible editions and reliable datings – has for the most part been ignored in descriptions of the broad outlines of Dutch literature between 1300 and 1350. Gradually, however, the contours of the varied literary culture prevailing in Ruusbroec's day have begun to emerge.

With Boendale as the star attraction and mystical prose at its intellectual core, Middle Dutch literature was a multifaceted business. The scribe who made the only surviving copy of the Arthurian romance *Ferguut* was also responsible for the oldest known Middle Dutch transcript containing the sermons of Meister Eckhart. A codex full of medical and cosmographical texts contains a poem about divine love that is by no means inferior in rhyme and expression to the sublime verses of the beguine Hadewijch. Jacob van Maerlant, still known as the patriarch of didactics, penned in *Vander drievoudichede* (*On the Trinity*) more than thirty stanzas patterned after church hymns on the mystery of divine unity in threefold diversity. Together these observations give an impression

³³ See De Libera 1996 and Verger 1997. With respect to Ruusbroec, see Warnar 2000a, esp. pp. 695–98.

of the intellectual framework of Middle Dutch literature, within which the chaplain Ruusbroec was able to develop into an author of high-quality mystical prose.³⁴

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Maerlant's strophic poems and the hypotheses about their origins bring us back to Ruusbroec's living and working environment: the collegiate church with its canons, chaplains and other clerics, the majority of whom probably hoped or expected to receive a benefice. Ruusbroec's first readers must be sought among the body corporate of Brussels chaplains; it was, after all, Brussels clerics who first joined the mystic in Groenendaal or founded similar communities elsewhere. Willem Daneels, a chaplain at St Gudula's who might have been a close colleague of Ruusbroec, founded the Augustinian priory of Rooklooster, which was patterned after Groenendaal. From Daneels's community come the oldest surviving copies of Ruusbroec's works, which form part of a relatively large collection of Middle Dutch manuscripts in which mystical literature is well represented. A number of these books passed through many hands before ending up in the library of Rooklooster, some coming from booksellers and scribes in Brussels and others from the Carthusians of Herne. All these institutions, however, including Groenendaal, were part of a Brussels network of manuscript production and literary collectors. The books preserved at Rooklooster provide us with a glimpse of the Brussels republic of letters in which Ruusbroec found his first readers.³⁵

It was also in this milieu that the collected works of the mysterious beguine Hadewijch were known, copied and studied. Complete transcriptions of her oeuvre were supplemented with poems of a more theological nature. This mystical poetry and the work of Ruusbroec share not only a penchant for abstract reflection but also a stanzaic form. Literal quotations can even be found, including this example from *On Seven Rungs*:

³⁴ See Warnar 2000a and Warnar 2002b. See Reynaert 1995 on developments outside mystical literature. For early mystical prose of Flemish origin, see Lievens 1960c and De Vooy 1921. See also Kwakkel & Mulder 2001 (*Ferguut* scribe), Lievens 1958 (poem from the school of Hadewijch; for the manuscript, see Jansen-Sieben 1968, pp. 131–42) and Verdam & Leendertsz 1918, pp. 61–85 and 182–95 (*Vander drievoudichede*; regarding the same sources in Hadewijch, see Mommaers 1995b, p. 105).

³⁵ On the collection of books at Rooklooster, see Warnar 1997b and Kwakkel 2002.

Freed from our spirit before God in undisguisèd ardour
 We are detached from histories and all recorded culture
 This is a life of contemplation of the highest order.

*daer wi ons ontgheesten met blooeter minnen in Gods ansichte
 daer sijn wi los ende ledegh van alre hystorien ende van allen gedichte
 Dit es een scouwende leven na den hooghsten ghewichte.*³⁶

The tenor is vintage Ruusbroec, but the lengthy lines of verse are a rather unsuccessful adaptation of a much better proportioned stanza from a poem on the divine light, which appears in manuscripts of Hadewijch's works and also in a codex from Rooklooster (note the similarities in the Dutch verses):

Were we to attain this light
 We would be empty in his sight
 Of mores, of all tidings bright
 Of history and what men write
 And in a void as dark as night
 Then we would see the light of lights.

*Waren wij comen te desen lichte
 So waren wij ledich in sijn ghesichte
 Van alre wise, van alre berichte
 Van alre storien, van alre ghedichte.
 In een afgrondich onghestichte
 Saghen wij dan dat licht der lichte.*³⁷

In the next section of the *Rungs*, Ruusbroec already demonstrates a much better command of the mono-rhyme in a poem on God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost:

Trinity of persons, yet one God in nature,
 Maker of all heaven and earth and every living creature,
 Whom we shall adore and worship, thank and praise for ever.
 We were made in His own image, after His own figure.
 This is bliss for those of a most pure and noble nature.

*drieheit der persone, eenen god in der natueren,
 die hemel ende erde ghescapen heeft ende alle creatueren,
 dien selen wi minnen, danken ende loven in eewegh dueren.
 Hi heeft ons ghemaect tot sine beelde na sine figure.
 Dat es blisscap groot den edelen pueren.*³⁸

³⁶ *Rungs* 1043–46.

³⁷ For the poems, see Van Mierlo 1952 (quotation 27/19–24).

³⁸ *Rungs* 1061–63.

The verses betray an interest in the style of mystical literature which Ruusbroec shares with the anonymous poet – or poetess – of the stanzas. They are even more closely bound by a common language full of allusions that are lost on the uninitiated. Other stanzas play a subtle game with the rhyming pair (*ver*)*crighen*/*ontbliven* in all its shades of meaning, setting forth the belief that one must continually ‘crave’ (*crighen*) higher things, even though they will always ‘remain unattainable’ (*ontbliven*, which also means ‘to fail to appear’). And what one does ‘obtain’ (*vercrighet*) of pure knowledge (of God) is nothing compared to what ‘escapes’ (*ontblivet*) our understanding:

Knowledge pure
 Though vast and sure
 That we obtain,
 Seems but small
 If we recall
 The unattained.

*In kinnen bloet
 Al eest groet
 Dat mens vercrighet,
 Het scijnt alse niet
 Alse men besiet
 dat daer ontblivet.*³⁹

This idea was apparently current among the insiders grouped around Ruusbroec, as evidenced by the closing words of the *Realm*:

That all of this we may
 Obtain without delay,
 We implore the Holy Trinity.

*Dat wij al dit vercrighen
 sonder eenich ontbliven,
 dies helpe ons die heilighe Drievuldicheyt.*⁴⁰

It is possible that these words were not originally part of the *Realm*. A scribe may have added them as a personal touch, but Ruusbroec manages convincingly to offer variations on the theme of ‘craving in unattainability’ (*crighen in ontbliven*). With a great feeling for paradox, he uses this expression in the *Espousals* to describe the insatiable hunger

³⁹ Van Mierlo 1952, 17/13–18.

⁴⁰ *Realm* 2757–59.

of desire: ‘thus there is a hungry craving to infinity, and God overflows in unattainability’ (*hier omme es daer een eewich hongherich crighen, ende god vloeyt al over in een ontbliven*).⁴¹

Ruusbroec and his first readers shared a mystical Dutch vocabulary, which they used for speaking and writing about the lofty subject of experiencing God. The works of Hadewijch and other texts had provided them with a literary idiom containing such concepts as *orewoet* (‘impetuosity’) for mystical passion, *eisschen* (‘demands’) for God’s inexorable attraction, *gherinen* (‘touch’) for being touched by God and *ghebruken* (‘enjoy’) for enjoyment with the connotation of satisfaction in the experience of oneness with God (*fruitio Dei*). The use of these concepts is extraordinary, not least because explanation seems superfluous. Ruusbroec assumed that his readers knew the special meaning of these terms and could place them in a specific mystical context. While translators and lexicographers have long wrestled with the now esoteric-sounding language of Middle Dutch mysticism, for the first readers of the *Espousals*, one word sufficed.

In these circles the master’s words were studied closely, as appears from one of the oldest copies of the *Tabernacle*, coming from the collection of books at Rooklooster which also contained the Hadewijch manuscripts. One passage – in which Ruusbroec advises burning everything about the Eucharist that is unfathomable in the fire of love – contains the following reference by way of a marginal note:

Jan van Ruusbroec says in *The Spiritual Espousals* that he wrote: It is gluttony of spirit to take scripture otherwise than as it serves for blessedness. But sobriety of spirit means to profit [from scripture]. Jan van Ruusbroec.⁴²

⁴¹ *Realm* 2030–31 and 2045–46 and *Espousals* b1532–38. Cf. also the *Stone* 554–55. Ruusbroec’s disciple Jan van Leeuwen was also familiar with the expression (see De Vooy 1915–16, p. 130), but for an occurrence of it presumably outside the circle of Brussels mysticism, see De Bruin 1940, p. 91 and Mertens 1987 for the text. On the stanzas in relation to Ruusbroec, see Axters 1950–60, pp. 195–205 and 273–77, as well as Warnar 2000a, n. 68, with a list of literature. See De Vreese 1901, pp. 293–310 and Lievens 1958, 1987 and 1992 for more examples of mystical poetry in this sphere. On the Hadewijch manuscripts, see Kwakkel 1999. See Willaert 1993a on Ruusbroec as a poet.

⁴² Vienna, ÖNB ser.nova 12899, fol. 65r: ‘Her Jan van Rusbroec seget inde gheesteleke brulocht die hi maecte: Dat es gulsicheit van gheeste dat men die scrijften anders nempt danse dient ter zalicheit. Maer soberheit van gheeste es profitelheit te nemmen. Her Jan van Rusbroec.’ See *Tabernacle* 313/27–31 for the passage to which the commentary refers. The commentary is a paraphrase of the *Espousals* 733–37.

Nowadays the margins of medieval manuscripts are scrutinised for traces of their readers and indications of the milieu in which they circulated. Glosses like the one quoted above, however, provide scant evidence of the close relations between Ruusbroec and a circle of religiously inspired readers, the core of which – we can only assume – resided in the Brussels body of collegiate chaplains. The following chapters will examine this readership and show that as early as 1350 the *Espousals* was warmly received in Basel and Strasbourg by the *Gottesfreunde* (friends of God): groups of secular clergy and lay people who shared a burning interest in mystical literature. The figure to whom the *Gottesfreunde* in Basel gravitated was Heinrich of Nördlingen, a priest who sought to provide inspiring literature to religiously committed patricians and monastics. Texts were imported from far and wide; the *Gottesfreunde* in the Upper Rhine region even possessed excerpts from Hadewijch's work, which had scarcely been circulated in the Low Countries. Conversely, Brussels manuscripts contain all kinds of texts which seem to have originated in the literary circuit of the *Gottesfreunde*.⁴³

The close contacts between Basel and Brabant suggest that Brussels also had a 'friends of God' circle, where Ruusbroec's texts first circulated among interested readers from the socio-religious network binding the churches, chapels, convents, confraternities, beguinages and hospitals. Many of these religious institutions had their own chaplains, most of whom were employed by the Collegiate Church of St Gudula and knew one another from the body corporate of chaplains, from which new religious practices could be initiated, including the supply and distribution of literature. Large numbers of ordained priests were involved in the administrative work of the city. Jan Hinckaert, Vranke vanden Coudenberg and their confrères are frequently mentioned in historical documents connected with appointments, transactions and donations. More important than the official circuit was an informal culture of religious groups, in which the lower clergy played a key role. It is possible that the more impassioned clerics visited the house of Jan Hinckaert, who lived from around 1335 with Ruusbroec and Vranke vanden Coudenberg in a community of priests pursuing the *vita apostolica*. The activities of Heinrich of Nördlingen shows how a circle of

⁴³ On traces of use in manuscripts as a key to their readership, see in general Kerby-Fulton & Justice 1997; for Middle Dutch manuscripts, see Van der Poel 1994. On the *Gottesfreunde*, see III.1 and III.2, with an extensive list of literature. On Heinrich of Nördlingen, see Weitlauff 1981.

Gottesfreunde could provide the fertile ground necessary for someone like Ruusbroec to flourish as a spiritual writer, despite his modest position as a chaplain at the Church of St Gudula.⁴⁴

3. The *Espousals* in Context

And then came the *Espousals*, not as a bolt from the blue, yet written on a nearly blank page at the beginning of a new chapter in Dutch literary history. For as natural as it may seem that Ruusbroec wrote in prose, in his own day the *Espousals* must have been something special, if only because of its form. Most Middle Dutch authors remained faithful to the more familiar rhyme until well into the fourteenth century, by which time literary prose was beginning to make a hesitant entry into Ruusbroec's mother tongue. Sermons, letters and translations of the Bible were the most notable exceptions, but these texts did not compare in popularity with literature in verse. Jacob van Maerlant's *Rijmbijbel* (*Rhyming Bible*) has survived in more manuscripts – fragmentary or otherwise – than all the prose translations of biblical texts preceding the first full Bible translation of 1360.⁴⁵

Even exegesis continued to be written in verse, despite the problems arising merely from the quotation of the relevant texts: *Doen dwoert sprac ende nederquam/Faciamus hominem ad ymaginem et similitudinem nostram* (When the Word spoke and descended/Let us make man in our image and likeness; cf. Gen. 1:26). This curious metrical struggle is attributed to the fourteenth-century poet and performing artist Augustijnken, who sought to 'expound' (*exponeren*) by means of 'fine words' (*sconen worden*) and 'sweet teachings' (*sueter leren*) the complicated Gospel according to St John. The poet's persistence in using rhyme for this learned undertaking has to do with the fact that he was accustomed to reciting his texts to an audience. Authors of texts meant for private reading were just as accustomed to versification, however. Around 1326, when the

⁴⁴ For information on the confraternities, hospitals and beguinages in Brussels at the time of Ruusbroec, see Libois 1967–69 (on the Confraternity of St Eligius and its chaplain, see vol. I, p. 55); Bonenfant 1965, pp. 57–83 (on the Hospital of St John and the Confraternity of the Holy Spirit); Lefèvre 1942, pp. 229–32 (*idem*) and pp. 99–110 (on the beguinage of Terarken) and p. 190 (Confraternity of St Mary).

⁴⁵ An inventory of Middle Dutch Bible manuscripts pre-dating the 1360 translation is to be found in Biemans 1984, pp. 11–55; only a small number of these can be dated with certainty to before 1360. Manuscripts of the *Rijmbijbel* can be found through the URL in the bibliography.

anonymous Antwerp translator of the *Sidrac* decided to respect the prose of his French source text, he felt compelled to justify his decision in a prologue – a rhyming one, no less:

For the rhymes that we invent,
Are often not equivalent
To what the writer meant to say.

*Want rime, alsoe wijt vinden,
Doet dicke die materie winden
Anders danse die makere seide.*⁴⁶

A few years later, when Ruusbroec decided to write his *Espousals* in prose, he dispensed altogether with an explanatory introduction. Having studied Latin literature in depth, this was only a small step for him, but a giant leap for Middle Dutch letters.

It was not only its form, however, which placed the *Espousals* in the vanguard of Dutch literature; it was also the fact that the protagonists of Middle Dutch mysticism had previously been women. The spectacular biographies of inspired, impassioned nuns and beguines had been translated from the Latin, and some women were themselves writers: in addition to the work of Hadewijch, there is a treatise by the Cistercian nun Beatrijs of Nazareth on the many-hued and all-consuming love of God titled *Van seven manieren van heyligher minnen* (*On Seven Modes of Holy Love*). Beatrijs's text – in prose! – is by no means inferior to the work of Hadewijch. Both are now great names in literary history, but we should not lose sight of the fact that their meteoric rise to fame in our time is inversely proportional to the relative obscurity of Hadewijch and Beatrijs in their own day, judging from the paucity of manuscripts of their works. Even so, the fact that Ruusbroec had every opportunity to study their texts confirms earlier conjectures that Brussels was the epicentre of Middle Dutch mysticism.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Critical edition of *Sinte Jans ewangelium* in Blommaert 1838–51, vol. III, pp. 131–42; the quotation comes from verses 90–91. Regarding the text, see Hogenelst 1997, p. 40. Another rhyming biblical commentary – on the Song of Songs – has survived in part; it presents the same problems regarding quotations from the Latin source text (see Hap 1975). The quotation from the *Sidrac* appears in Van Tol 1936, pp. 2/63–65.

⁴⁷ On Beatrijs's life and work, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 137–57 and McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 166–174. Critical edition of *Seven manieren* in Reypens & Van Mierlo 1926. See Warnar 1997b on the availability of mystical literature in Brussels. See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 4 and 6, for several important manuscripts with Latin texts from the vicinity of Brussels. See Wackers 1993 for a short survey on the place of Hadewijch and Beatrijs in the history of Dutch literature.

From the work of Beatrijs and Hadewijch, Ruusbroec absorbed the language of love. The word ‘love’ (*minne*) appears so frequently in the *Espousals* that the index of the most recent edition lists only the number of times it occurs: 179, for example, in the important middle section alone. Examples of Ruusbroec’s varied terminology include the following: ‘lacerations of love’ (*quetsuren van minnen*), ‘a subtle spiritual love without labour’ (*eene subtile gheestelijcke minne zonder arbeit*), ‘storm of love’ (*storme van minnen*), ‘the strife of love’ (*der minnen strijt*), ‘enjoyable love’ (*ghebruckelijcker minnen*), ‘this is what it is to love’ (*dit is minnen pleghen*), ‘a broad, common love’ (*ene wide ghemeyne minne*), ‘sensitive love’ (*ghevoelijcker minnen*) and ‘fathomless love’ (*grondeloser minnen*).⁴⁸

It is tempting to conclude on the basis of such inventories that the *Espousals* is a continuation of the vernacular literature already cultivated to a high level by Hadewijch and Beatrijs of Nazareth. The similarities in language and terminology, however, are not nearly so important as the differences in subject matter and approach. Hadewijch sketched a world of emotions in which the soul was driven to and fro between desire, rapture and desperation, whereas Ruusbroec’s description of the ascent to the divine was so structured that it gave the reader the opportunity to survey his own inner being. Hadewijch’s fanciful poetry and the architectonically constructed *Espousals* lie on either side of a watershed in Middle Dutch mysticism.

Ecstasy was followed by theological analysis. It was a huge upheaval, but one that took place more gradually than the gulf between Hadewijch and Ruusbroec suggests. The idiosyncratic and elitist beguine literature is not a reliable gauge of Middle Dutch spiritual prose around 1300. A better yardstick is the voluminous manuscript containing the forty-eight oldest written sermons in Dutch. These so-called *Limburgse sermoenen* (*Limburg Sermons*) show how learned clerics cautiously attempted to instruct monastics, as well as groups or individuals among the pious laity, who had insufficient knowledge of Latin and were therefore dependent on texts in the vernacular: ‘A preacher must give good consideration to what he says and who his listeners are, so that he does not offer indigestible fare to those who are still milk-fed and does not serve “baby food” (*kintsche vudinghe*) to those who tolerate rich fare. But just as one is obliged to instruct the young and beginners with undemanding material, so must one speak to adults about great wisdom.’⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See *Espousals* b495, b1116–17, b1558, b1562–63, b1985, b1986, b2052, b2148 and b2172. See also Wiseman 1984.

⁴⁹ Kern 1895, p. 616: ‘Dergene die sermonen sal, hi sal ernstelike sin wort besien

The *Limburgse sermoenen* were written with consideration for the less educated, but matters of great religious wisdom are nevertheless discussed at length. These sermons were deeply influenced by the affective spirituality of the Cistercians. One recognises, in the allegories of the orchard of the soul and the maidens of Jerusalem, the symbolism of the Song of Songs from which Hadewijch and Beatrijs of Nazareth drew their inspiration, but the point-by-point treatment and edifying tone of the sermons are just as characteristic.⁵⁰

It is natural to connect the *Limburgse sermoenen* with the pastoral care administered by Brabantine Cistercians to nuns and beguines, although there is no direct evidence of a link. One thing the texts clearly show, however, is that on the eve of the appearance of the *Espousals*, attempts were being made to bridge the gap between the intellectual culture of the monasteries and the vernacular world of the laity. In such cases one is inclined – in an international context – to single out the mendicant orders. Franciscans and Dominicans functioned in various regions as the driving force behind spiritual literature in the vernacular. Their presence and activity in the Low Countries is not in doubt, but the contribution of the mendicant orders to Dutch mysticism was certainly not substantial enough to warrant speaking of a specific spirituality comparable to that manifesting itself in the German-speaking territories, where a *Mystik der Predigtbücher* (*Mysticism of Sermon Books*) arose under the leadership of Meister Eckhart and his Dominican friars.⁵¹

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ende sal oec besien degene dise hoeren sulen, alsoe datter nit en bide dengenen hart spise die te vuden sin met melke ende dengenen die hart spise vermogen nit en bide kintsche vudinge. Mar also als mi sculdech es te gevene den jungen ende den begenenden ligte ende segte leringe, also es mi sculdech onder volkomen lide te spreken van groter wisheide.’ On the *Limburgse sermoenen*, see Scheepsma 2001.

⁵⁰ On the Cistercian origins of beguine spirituality and literature, see Mertens 1993a, p. 20, Langer 1994, pp. 111–13 and Reynaert 1994. See also Verdeyen 1977 and Mommaers 1989, pp. 92–99 (Hadewijch and William of St Thierry), Willeumier-Schalij 1943a and b and Reynaert 1974 and 1981a, pp. 23–24 (Richard of St Victor, Hadewijch and the *Limburgse sermoenen*). Another important source for religious literature written around 1300 consists of the expositions on the earliest Middle Dutch translation of the epistles and gospels for the liturgical year (Zieleman 1978, pp. 51–54). On the general subject of clerics as the literary mentors of women, see Grundmann 1961, pp. 452–75; Peters 1988; Scheepsma 1997, pp. 208–14.

⁵¹ See in general Axters 1939. See also Axters 1947 and De Paepe 1992 (on the Dominicans Hendrik of Leuven and Nicholas of Strasbourg). Cf. Warnar 2000a, pp. 687–88.

Whether or not he was influenced by the *Limburgse sermoenen*, Ruusbroec knew the literature of the Cistercians and was familiar with the learned mysticism of the Dominicans. As a pioneer of Middle Dutch prose, however, the author of the *Espousals* was left largely to his own devices. The functional prose of sermons and letters was wasted on him. The chaplains of the Collegiate Church of St Gudula were not called upon to perform pastoral duties. Ruusbroec was not a preacher who had to tailor his texts to fit the intellectual capacity of a group officially entrusted to his spiritual care. He was free to formulate his ideas as he saw fit, and in this endeavour he was guided by Latin writings cast in the Franciscan mould.

Two currents can be distinguished in the mystical theology of the fourteenth century: the Dominicans' belief in the primacy of the intellect and the Franciscans' view that love and the will were of overriding importance on one's path to God. Ruusbroec declined to participate in the discussion, but his sympathies lay with the Friars Minor. At all events he wanted nothing to do with overconfident intellectualism:

The clever scholar, though he be without the grace of God, can elucidate scripture plainly, by means of abundant references and acute understanding and long practice in the school, but he cannot savour the fruit and the sweetness hidden within it without divine love.⁵²

In the 'realm of scripture' (*rijcke der scriftueren*) astute thinking was not enough. This is not to say that Ruusbroec rejected reason and the intellect altogether. He expounded the common view that contact with God makes one feel the limitations of the human intellect, 'for we perceive that we are touched. But if we wish to know what it is or whence it comes, then reason and all creaturely consideration fall short.' On the path to unity with God, the soul leaves the domain of reason. Even if Ruusbroec were not able to say this from his own experience, he could have read about it in the wealth of literature on the subject. With the exact indication that one perceives God's touch 'above reason, but not without reason', he is following a twelfth-century theory from Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin minor*, a well-reasoned handbook on contemplative theology and the relationship between sensory perception, the workings of reason and the effects of divine revelation.⁵³

⁵² *Realm* 2645–52. Cf. also the opening of the *Temptations* (1–28) and *Espousals* b1232–37. On currents in Franciscan and Dominican mysticism, see Hasebrink 1993.

⁵³ *Espousals* b2118–22: 'want wij vernemen dat wij gherenen werden. Maer wille

The insights of Richard of St Victor remained current for a long time, partly because they were appropriated by Bonaventure and his fellow Franciscans, whose writings had also taught Ruusbroec that reason falls short (*failliert*) when confronted with divine transparency, whereas the affective faculties – love in particular – open doors that remain forever shut to the intellect:

... even though reason and intellect fail in the face of the divine brightness and remain outside, before the door, nevertheless the faculty of loving wishes to go further, for, like understanding, it has been compelled and invited, but it is blind and wants enjoyment, and enjoyment consists more in savouring and feeling than in understanding. This is why love wants to move on, whereas the intellect remains outside.⁵⁴

This is a distinctly Franciscan notion, which can be found in nearly identical wording in both Jacob van Maerlant's *Sinte Franciscus leven* (*The Life of St Francis*), adapted from Bonaventure's biography of the order's founder, and a Middle Dutch adaptation of *De septem itineribus aeternitatis*.⁵⁵ This manual of mystical theology by the Franciscan Rudolf of Biberach is more likely to have been Ruusbroec's source, though the writings of the greatest of the Friars Minor, Bonaventure himself, were also truly important for the *Espousals*. It has long been assumed that Ruusbroec's fundamental tripartite division of life – the active life, the inner, yearning life and the contemplative life – was inspired by *De triplici via*. In this work Bonaventure connected the time-honoured spiritual hierarchy of beginning, progressing and perfect believers with equally traditional stages on the path to union with God: purification (*purgatio*), illumination (*illuminatio*) and perfection (*perfectio*). In the fourteenth century both triads were combined in various ways, but Ruusbroec seems – like Bonaventure in *De triplici via* – to have had a double triad in mind: a path from purification to perfection existing in the active, the yearning and the contemplative life.⁵⁶

wij weten wat si ochte wanen het come, soe failleert redene ende alle creatuerlijc ghemerc'. On Richard's categories of contemplation, see Minnis 1983, p. 328 and Wackers 1996c, pp. 11–27.

⁵⁴ *Espousals* b1522–27.

⁵⁵ Maximilianus 1954, verses 5708–10 for Maerlant. Translation of Biberach (quoted from Van Itersson 1857, p. 161): 'And where reason thus stands still, love goes forth, with fervent desire and powerful reachings that go beyond all reason' (*Ende daer dat verstant also blijft staende, daer gaet die minne voert, mit vuerigher begheringhe ende crachtigher uutstreckinghe die boven alle verstande sijn*); cf. Mertens 1986, pp. 197–210).

⁵⁶ On *De triplici via*, see Ruh, 1990–99, vol. II, pp. 428–36, n. 51, regarding the

The *Espousals* consists of three self-contained parts, each with a full interpretation of a passage from the Gospel according to St Matthew (25:6) – ‘Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him’ – which is applied in succession to the active, the yearning and the contemplative life. This stratification corresponds to the three-fold hierarchy of believers, but Ruusbroec sketches in the first two parts a complete spiritual evolution along the lines of purification, illumination and perfection. Proceeding from the biblical passage, Ruusbroec distinguishes in logical succession the recovery of spiritual sight (the purification – *Behold*), by which man becomes responsive to the coming of Christ (the illumination – *the bridegroom cometh*), which prompts him to ‘go out’ and prepare to meet Him (perfection). Ruusbroec sees the same crowning of achievements – but with ever greater rewards – at each level of spiritual life. In the active life, the soul finds Christ in the ‘light of faith’ (*lichte des gheloofs*), in the inner, yearning life one enjoys the ‘unity of the Godhead’ (*eenicheit der godheit*), and in the superessential life of divine contemplation one experiences the unimaginable ‘unity of the living ground where it possesses itself according to the mode of its uncreatedness’ (*eenicheit des levenden gronts daer Hi hem besit na wise sire onghescapenheit*).⁵⁷

Here Ruusbroec uses theological concepts. A thorough analysis would launch us into the high seas of mystical doctrine, whereas a safe course alongside the solid quay of literary history suffices to show how the *Espousals* followed in the wake of *De triplici via*. In any case, Ruusbroec had Bonaventure’s programmatic prologue firmly in mind:

‘Behold, I have described the truth to you in three ways.’ Because all learning bears the sign of the Trinity, the knowledge taught in Holy Scripture in particular must display the mark of the Trinity. For this reason the Sage says he has described knowledge of the divine in a three-fold manner (cf. Proverbs 22:20), namely because scripture has a three-fold spiritual meaning: moral, allegorical and anagogical.⁵⁸

Moral, symbolic and transcendental: these are the very categories Ruusbroec chose in the three consecutive parts of his *Espousals* for the

double triad, with reference to the older literature. For Ruusbroec’s teachings, see esp. Ampe 1950–57, vol. III.

⁵⁷ *Espousals* 48–55, 1009–11, b22–23 and c226–27.

⁵⁸ For the quotation (including translation and interpretation), see Ruh, 1990–99, vol. II, p. 428.

exegesis of his biblical motto. The middle section of the first book expounds a system of virtues pertaining to the Beatitudes and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The long second book uses elaborate metaphors, as well as countless figures of speech and literary tropes, to describe how man attains the interiorised condition of 'unity of spirit' (*enicheit des gheests*). The language and tone of the short third book is characterised by the rarefied abstraction of the superessence of the Godhead.⁵⁹

Composing the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec found the form and style he had searched for in vain when writing the *Realm*. One cannot help thinking that the key to this achievement lay in further, profound study of the works of Bonaventure and his fellow friars. Ruusbroec had assimilated their way of thinking and style of writing to such an extent that he could handle in his own Middle Dutch a literary tradition which preferred promise to proof, which chose symbolism rather than concepts, and which assumed that, on one's path to God, reason was eclipsed by desire.

Ruusbroec's works bear the mark of this affective branch in medieval literary theory. The direct influence of the Franciscans comes to light in passages in which the technique and modes of expression were taken from existing texts. For example, the sustained parallelism in the enumeration of the deprivations experienced by Jesus is a set stylistic device in the meditative Passion literature of Bonaventure and his followers:

For Jesus began to suffer early on – at his birth: poverty and cold. He was circumcised and He shed His blood; He was brought to safety in a foreign land. He served Joseph and His mother; He experienced hunger and thirst, shame and slander, the insulting words and deeds of the Jews. He fasted; He kept vigils, and was tempted by the devil. He was surrendered to the people. He travelled from country to country and from city to city, and preached the gospel with great effect and seriousness. Finally he was arrested by the Jews, who were His enemies, but He was their friend. He was betrayed, mocked and made to look ridiculous, flagellated and beaten and found guilty by false witnesses.

The same theme, with the same figures of speech, was developed repeatedly in Middle Dutch texts. As the fourteenth century progressed, models of this kind, stemming from spiritual literature in Latin, began

⁵⁹ This was Gerson's opinion; see Ampe 1975a, p. 59 ff.



Fig. 4 Ruusbroec as an inspired author, with a wax tablet containing the first words of the *Espousals* in Latin: *Ecce sponsus venit*.

to appear in the vernacular, but Ruusbroec was the first to use them on a large scale in a work written in Middle Dutch.⁶⁰

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The composition of the *Espousals* proceeded from the emphasis on form which scholars writing in Latin had been demonstrating for centuries. Every genre had certain requirements which a text had to meet to be recognisable to readers and to raise the appropriate expectations. The author's style told his readers what he was trying to achieve with his text. Against the background of this adherence to medieval conventions, we must view the stylistic techniques applied in the *Espousals* as the driving mechanisms of meditation, which stir up and fuel the feelings in order to approach God 'in exercises of yearning, that is, an interior, affective impulse of the Holy Spirit, which incites and impels us to all virtue'.⁶¹

Literary theory was dominated at the time by the distinction between the way in which knowledge enriched the human mind: through the intellect or through the affective faculties. In theological terms the dichotomy between concrete science and higher wisdom was distinguished by the terms *scientia* and *sapientia*. In Ruusbroec's century, neither field was clearly demarcated with respect to the other, but they had been divided into more or less independent domains: the professional theology of the schoolmen and the traditional spirituality of the monastics. To gain understanding of Truth, divinity was practised as an academic discipline employing the instruments of human reason. Knowledge of Good, on the other hand, was obtained by using one's intellectual capacities in the yearning for God. This did not trivialise theology as a science; rather, a major role was reserved for the personal experience of 'savouring' a wisdom that could not be defined objectively.⁶²

In biblical study, from which medieval literary theory had been derived, there were two approaches to discovering *scientia* and *sapientia*

⁶⁰ *Espousals* b291–97. On the sources of this passage about Christ's sufferings, see Warnar 1995a, p. 155, n. 26 and cf. Bestul 1996, pp. 43–50.

⁶¹ *Espousals* b212–14: 'in begheerlijcker oefeninghen, dat es een inwindich ghevoelijc driven des heylighs gheests die ons stoket ende drivet tot allen duechden'. On the adherence to medieval conventions, see Wogan-Browne *et al.* 1999, pp. 212–13. Regarding Ruusbroec and literary theory, see Warnar 1997a.

⁶² For an in-depth discussion of this subject, see Leclercq 1982; with regard to mystical literature, see Gillespie 1982, esp. pp. 199–202 and Watson 1991, pp. 23–27. An illuminating example is to be found in Roest 1999.

in scripture. Those who wished to savour the wisdom of God's word saw reading as a form of meditation and steeped themselves in the literary expressiveness of imagery and stylistic ornamentation, while those seeking to broaden their knowledge based their endeavours on the assumption that logical reasoning could be used to interpret God's word by means of formal arguments derived from scholastic *quaestio*.

Ruusbroec had little use for the obsession with reasoning that caused instruction to deteriorate into contrived arguments: 'Teaching has become quibbling, controversies and novelties which add little or nothing to either the honour of God or the profit of souls.'⁶³ Ruusbroec adhered to the notion that literature in general was a product of inspiration and that the Bible should be viewed as an extraordinary work of divine enlightenment. The most profound meaning of scripture could only be approximated in words. Argumentation fell short, so authors were forced to resort to literary means more suggestive than descriptive, thus appealing to the reader's affective faculties. One could, by the grace of divine inspiration, attain the higher spheres of the 'realm of scripture' (*rijcke der scriftueren*) – whether through the imagination, in visions and revelations, or through the intellect, in an even more abstract 'intelligible truth or spiritual likenesses where God shows himself to be fathomless' (*verstendighe waerheit ochte gheestelijcke gheliken daer hem god in vertoent grondeloes*).

This distinction puts Ruusbroec among a large number of medieval authors who followed the example of the *visio intellectualis* of St John the Evangelist, who not only saw in his mind's eye the Revelation of the Apocalypse but also plumbed the depths of its meaning. Ruusbroec was referring more particularly to a widespread typology of visions from a standard introduction to the Apocalypse attributed to the twelfth-century theologian Gilbert of Poitiers. His text, which had also reached Ruusbroec's circles in a Middle Dutch translation, was certainly among the mystic's sources.⁶⁴

Put in a historical perspective, Ruusbroec's reference to visionary theory confirmed once again his allegiance to theological tradition, but it also provided his readers with an indication of how the *Espousals*

⁶³ *Enclosures* 58–59: 'Leringhe es subtijlheit worden, questien ende nuwe vonden daer die ere gods noch vrocht der zielen luttel ocht niet ane en gheleghet.'

⁶⁴ See *Espousals* b549–58 for the typology of visions. See Minnis 1984, p. 169, on the Apocalypse prologue; cf. Langer 1987, pp. 215–20. See Warnar 1998 on the prologue of the Middle Dutch version in connection with Ruusbroec.

was meant to be read. Ruusbroec's followers emphasised from the very beginning that he 'had gracefully composed his holy, glorious writings... from [the inspiration of] the Holy Spirit' (*heylegheer glorioser scrijftueren... te male gracioseleec ghedicht uten heileghen gheeste*). Ruusbroec's sense of experiencing God was rated more highly than his theological skills. Gerson – who was, despite his criticism, an attentive reader of the *Espousals* – thought that the strength of Ruusbroec's prose lay in its imagery, making it more effective *in affectu* than *in intellectu*. It is possible that the author himself would have preferred a better balance between the heart and the mind, but he would not have contested Gerson's judgement on this point. 'He who has not experienced this will not understand it' (*Dies noeyt en ghevoelde, hi en saelt niet wel verstaen*), wrote Ruusbroec in the *Espousals*.⁶⁵

His predilection for the affective did not imply that Ruusbroec left much to his readers' intuition. As a symbolist he was by no means an adherent of free association. The poetic eloquence of the *Espousals* lies in the inseparability of image and meaning. A famous passage is the elaborate comparison from the second book in which Ruusbroec describes Christ's entry into the human soul as the soon-to-be-fulfilled expectation of a new season:

So when summer is nigh and the sun rises, it draws the humidity out of the earth through the roots and through the very trunk of the tree into the branches, and from it come foliage, blossoms and fruit. Thus like the eternal sun, Christ rises and ascends in our hearts so that it becomes summer in the enrichment of virtues; He sheds His light and His warmth on our desire and draws the heart from the multiplicity of earthly things, producing unity and interiorisation, and causes the heart to grow and to leaf out with inner affection, and to blossom with yearning and devotion and to bring forth fruit with thanks and with praise, and to preserve this fruit eternally in humble woe that [comes] from [our] perpetual want.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *Espousals* b208–10. The quotation concerning Ruusbroec's texts appears in De Vreese 1895, p. 255. For Gerson, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 59–60.

⁶⁶ *Espousals* b347–57: 'Soe wanneer die somer naect ende die sonne hoghet, soe trect si die vochticheit uter eerden dore die wortelen ende dore dat selve bloecte inde rijseren; ende hier af comt loof, bloemen ende vrucht. Alsoe ghelijckerwijs alsoe die eewighe zonne Cristus hoghet ende opgheet in onser herten alsoe dat somer werde in chierheiden van duechden, soe ghevet hi sijn licht ende sijn hitte in onser begheerten ende trect dat herte van alre menichfuldicheit eertscher dinghe ende maect eenicheit ende innicheit ende doet dat herte groeyen ende loeven met innigher liefden ende bloeyen met begheerlijcker devocien ende vrocht bringhen met dancke ende met love ende die vrucht eewelijcke behouden in oetmoedighen wee altoes van ontblivene.' On Ruusbroec's controlled handling of the text, see De Baere 1995.

First of all, a stroke of virtuoso skill in this passage consists in Ruusbroec's apparently casual repetition of the subjects that have occupied him in the preceding chapters: desire, unity of spirit, interiorisation, love, devotion, thanks and praise – an ascending series of virtues by which one honours God until one realises 'in humble woe' (*in oetmoedighen wee*) that one will always fall short. This reprise is accompanied by the introduction of a new theme: how the sun gains in warmth from early spring to high summer. In mid-May its strength doubles in the sign of Gemini, when the humidity is drawn out of the earth: 'From it come dew and rain, and the fruit increases and is greatly multiplied.' The same sensation is experienced by the person who lets Christ grow in his heart: 'From this there sometimes comes the sweet rain of new inward consolation and the heavenly dew of divine sweetness.'⁶⁷ This gives rise to an inner joy of spiritual intoxication that cannot be held in check. One person bursts into song, while another weeps 'large tears' and yet another feels such 'disquietude' that he must 'run, leap and dance in three-four time' – *tripudieren* in Middle Dutch. Moreover, 'this drunkenness excites another to such a degree that he must clap his hands and applaud' (*dese dronckenheit also seere dat hi moet metten handen priken ende plaudeeren*).

This jubilation – sung in rhythmical, rhyming prose – does not last. In the early spring of devotion, night frost and mist can seriously stunt the development of the inner life if one is overly satisfied at the first signs of spiritual growth. Thus spiritual life undergoes changes, just as nature grows, blossoms and bears fruit under the influence of the sun in the course of the seasons. In the high summer of spiritual life, the 'impetuosity of love' (*orewoet van minnen*) can cause one to rise above oneself, but in the sultry dog days the spiritual fruit is in danger of rotting for those who let themselves be swept away by the frenzy of love. When the late summer of Virgo arrives, and the sun's warmth wanes, spiritual man – in expectation of the harvest – must resign himself to patience and even learn to accept his God-forsaken state. Then the sun enters Libra, and the days and nights are of equal length: 'the sun dispenses light against the darkness' (*de sonne deylt dat licht jeghen de donckerheit*). Thus man must remain mentally balanced, regardless of what Christ sends, 'sweet or sour, darkness or light' (*sуете oft suer*,

⁶⁷ *Espousals* b369–70, b377–79 ('Hier af comt dau ende reghen; ende die vrucht neemt toe ende wert sere menichfuldich') and b402–04 ('Hier af comt bi wilen soete reghen nuwes inwindichs troosts ende hemelschen dau godlijcker soeticheit').

donckerheit oft clærheit). This is harvest time: ‘the gathering of the grain and of all sorts of ripe fruits, on which one will live eternally and be rich with God. Thus the virtues are fulfilled, and desolation becomes eternal wine.’⁶⁸

The component parts of this section of the text have surprisingly diverse origins – from Richard of St Victor’s mystical doctrine of love *De quattuor gradibus violentiae caritatis* to the work of Hadewijch and the *Natuurkunde van het geheelal* (*Natural Science of the Universe*). Altogether this testifies to a significant degree of literacy and a great mastery of literary techniques hitherto unobserved in Middle Dutch prose. Seen in this way, the *Espousals* marks an extraordinary moment in the literary history of the Low Countries. The glory of Ruusbroec’s debut, however, lies in the allure with which the author combined existing elements to make a larger, more meaningful – but also more mysterious – whole, thus producing a true work of literature.⁶⁹

4. Masterpiece

Praise for the *Espousals* has never been lacking. Now generally recognised as Ruusbroec’s masterpiece, the text was acclaimed from the early days of modern scholarship for its unity of content and composition. Writing in 1855, Friedrich Böhlinger called it ‘the most elaborate piece of mystical writing of medieval Germanic mysticism, a truly architectonic structure’, and his opinion was quoted repeatedly in the first Dutch studies of Ruusbroec’s mysticism – which proudly pointed out that Böhlinger was ‘one of the most knowledgeable experts on medieval mystics’.⁷⁰

Even more than this church historian’s seal of approval, his description of the *Espousals* as an edifice appealed to the imagination. Van Mierlo was the first, in 1910, to describe the *Espousals* metaphorically as a cathedral ‘in which the whole of Christianity, the whole of God-

⁶⁸ *Espousals* b738–57: ‘de vergaderinghe des corens ende alrehande tidigher vruchte, daermen eewelijc af leven sal ende rijcke sijn met gode. Aldus werden die duechde volbracht ende mestroost wert eewich wijn’.

⁶⁹ For Richard, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, p. 67. Hadewijch and the *Natuurkunde* were discussed in I.2 and II.1.

⁷⁰ Böhlinger 1855, pp. 454–55; cf. Ampe 1975a, p. 546, n. 7 and Willaert 1995, pp. 49–50. Reference to Böhlinger in Jonckbloet 1889, vol. II, p. 395 and Van Otterloo 1896, p. 159.

seeking life is portrayed; with broad, clearly echoing naves, containing golden niches for every imaginable saint and leading up to the mysterious whispering in the *sanctum sanctorum*, where God alone speaks to the soul'. Van Mierlo was pleased to have devised this image, which four separate publications appearing in the next forty years borrowed almost verbatim to describe the *Espousals*.⁷¹

Nevertheless, what was for Van Mierlo little more than a happy comparison was later elaborated upon by the Flemish church historian and Dominican Stephanus Axters in a short but extremely worthwhile essay on 'De poëtische creatie bij de zalige Jan van Ruusbroec' (Poetic Creation in the Work of the Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec), in which he described the composition of the *Espousals* in terms of a Gothic church rising from its broad foundations along ascending lines that lead the viewer's gaze to the top of its spires: 'Just as the pious individual, upon entering the most frequented churches of the fourteenth century, was impressed by the majestic unity whereby the choir and gallery were wreathed with chapels, so, too, does anyone who takes Ruusbroec's masterpiece *The Spiritual Espousals* in hand soon realise that everything in this work is made of the same material, which takes on a warmer hue, the closer we get to the climax.'⁷²

Axters was offering a variation on a theory – now classic but at that time new – put forward by the art historian Erwin Panofsky, according to whom the tight unity of form of the Gothic cathedral was a product of the same medieval spirit that had led to the system of the scholastic *summa*. This proposition did not go unchallenged, but the idea of inspiration shared by author and architect alike retained its original appeal. It is even possible that Panofsky's theory is more viable in Axters's application, because a mystical synthesis like the *Espousals* lends itself more readily to comparison with the harmony of spires and arched vaults than does the strict syllogism of the *summa*. Moreover, it is tempting to think that Ruusbroec witnessed the construction of the Gothic Church of St Gudula while working on his equally monumental mystical treatise.⁷³

⁷¹ The comparison of the *Espousals* with a cathedral first appeared in Van Mierlo 1910, vol. I, p. 356 and again in 1928, p. 261; 1931, p. 222; 1950, p. 62; 1954, p. 157.

⁷² Axters 1957, quotation on p. 76.

⁷³ Panofsky 1951.

As an architect of literary texts, Ruusbroec had no equal in Middle Dutch. The cohesion of his texts is due primarily to his thematic structuring:

Now Christ, the Master of Truth, says, 'Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him.' In these words, Christ our Lover teaches us four things. In the first, He gives a command, in that He says, 'Behold.' Those who remain blind and neglect this command are all damned. In the second word, He shows us what we should see, namely, the coming of the Bridegroom. In the third place, He teaches us and commands what we should do, in that He says, 'Go ye out.' In the fourth word, where He says 'to meet him', he shows us the profit of all our labour and of all our life, namely, a loving meeting with the Bridegroom.⁷⁴

From just one biblical passage Ruusbroec develops the all-embracing composition of the *Espousals* in three books, each structured according to the same *divisio thematis*. From this superstructure arises a logical progression that Axters describes as the 'verticality' of the *Espousals*. The same pattern repeats itself three times in the *Espousals* – on the level of the active, the yearning and the contemplative life – in a threefold exposition of the same scriptural passage. Appearing before the reader's eyes is a three-part structure with its own divisions and coping-stone, just like the façade of a church in which the arches, rising one above the other, gradually recede from view. The active life is necessary 'for all who want to be saved', while the inner, yearning life is open to those who make the effort to perform spiritual exercises, although only a privileged few attain the heights of divine contemplation.

By strictly adhering to the *divisio thematis*, Ruusbroec succeeded in combining all the elements of the *Espousals* into a whole, despite his introduction of new subdivisions at every turn. Further refining his discussion of spiritual vision, Ruusbroec sets forth three conditions: the light of God's grace, a will freely turned towards God, and a conscience untainted by sin. The 'coming' of Christ is also threefold: His incarnation in the past, His daily entrance 'into every loving heart' (*in*

⁷⁴ *Espousals* 37–46: 'Nu spreect de meester der waerheyt Cristus: "Siet, de brudegom comt, gaet ute hem jeghen." In desen woorden leert ons Cristus, onse minnaere .iiij. dinghe. Inden eersten ghevet hi een ghebodt in dien dat hi spreect: "Siet". Die blint bliven ende dit ghebodt versuemen, die sijn alle verdoemt. Inden anderen woorde toent hi ons wat wij sien selen: dat is de toecomst dies brudegoms. Ten derden male leert hi ons ende ghebidt wat wij doen sullen, in dien dat hi spreect: "Gaet ute". Inden vierden woorde, daer hi spreect: "Jegen hem", bewijst hi ons profijt ende orbore al ons wercs ende al ons levens, dat es: een minlijc ontmoet des brudegoms.'

elcke minnende herte), and His future appearance at the Last Judgement. Each of these tripartite divisions branches out into three more aspects: ‘In all these comings of our Lord and in all His works, there are three things to consider: the why and the wherefore, the mode within and the works without.’⁷⁵

The extraordinary thing about the *Espousals* is that its many ramifications, distinctions, divisions and sub-divisions are not in the least detrimental to a balanced composition. Each part of the *Espousals* is a separate entity, the pattern of which returns on a higher plane or proves to have been an underlying presence all along. Thus Ruusbroec begins the second part of the *Espousals* by explaining the threefold coming of Christ into the human psyche, which touches man’s affective powers and intellectual faculties as well as the simple essence of his spirit. This corresponds to a triple unity in human nature as the vital forces of body, mind and soul. Through the active life these three unities are ‘enriched and governed’ (*gheciert ende beseten*) like a kingdom, but in the inner, yearning life they are given a new dimension: ‘We now go on to discuss how these three unities are more sublimely enriched and more nobly governed by means of inner practice joined to the active life.’⁷⁶

Everywhere in the *Espousals* such structuring strengthens the coherence and symmetry of the work. Similar divisions underpin the *Realm*, but the great difference is that in the *Espousals* they produce the spatial effect that is lacking in Ruusbroec’s first work. Axters here draws a splendid parallel with the decoration of a church portal, window or chapel in which elements from the overall design of the building are repeated, but new and unique ornaments are incorporated as well. In the *Realm* Ruusbroec had riveted everything together, whereas for the new blueprint of the *Espousals* he applied divisions from the *Realm* separately to lend an independent structure to the various sections of the text. The gifts of the Holy Spirit – bound up in the *Realm* with choirs of angels, the elements, the Beatitudes and spiritual powers – became in the *Espousals* a means of signalling the beginning of a new section,

⁷⁵ *Espousals* 179–90: ‘In alle dese toecomste ons heeren ende in alle sine werke sijn te merkene drie dinghe: de sake ende de waeromme, de wise van binnen ende de werke van buyten.’ Cf. Warnar 1997a, p. 143.

⁷⁶ *Espousals* b41–92: ‘Nu willen wij voert spreken hoe deze drie eenicheden hoghere gheciert ende edelijckere beseten werden met innigher oefeninghen tot den werkenden levene.’ See Willeumier-Schalij 1948; Ampe 1950–57, vol. IV, pp. 35 and 39; Ampe 1957a (in more detail); Dinzelsbacher 1994, p. 123, regarding this idea in the writings of William of St Thierry.

which in some manuscript copies was given the heading: ‘an ordering of all the virtues arising from the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit’. In another chapter Ruusbroec used the firmament and the planets as ‘a similitude of God’s possessing the soul and moving it naturally and supernaturally’, according to another rubric.⁷⁷

Much had been gained with the transparent structure of the *Espousals*, but its stylistic subtleties demonstrated, more than anything else, that Ruusbroec’s talent as a writer had come into its own. In the *Realm* he says about ‘benevolence’ (*goedertierenheit*) simply that from this gift ‘come compassion and sympathy so that he [man] suffers with Christ in His Passion and in His suffering’ (*comt compassie ende een mede doeghen dat hi doeghet met Cristus in sine passie ende in sijn liden*). The same statement is developed in the *Espousals* into a passage of well-rounded and rhythmical prose in which compassion is not just mentioned but also evoked:

Compassion makes a person suffer and endure with Christ in His Passion when he considers: the reason for His torments, the mode and His forsakenness; the love, the wounds, His tenderness; the sorrow, the shame, His nobleness; the misery, the disgrace, His humiliation; the crown, the nails, His mercifulness; [His] perishing and dying in patience. These unheard-of, manifold torments of Christ our Redeemer and our Bridegroom move the merciful person in compassion and in pity towards Christ.⁷⁸

This reveals, in miniature, the grand scheme behind the *Espousals*. The carefully constructed parallel sentences repeatedly forge the link between the outward marks of Christ’s suffering and His inner virtues and qualities. Two more or less concrete concepts lead to the more essential abstractions – with the characteristic suffix *-heit* (-ness in English) – just as the reader of the *Espousals* is led, slowly but surely, from the tangible to the conceivable.

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⁷⁷ See the variants to *Espousals* b1422 (‘eene ordinancie alre dogede overmids die seven gaven des heilichs gheests’) and b1818 (‘een ghelijckenisse hoe god die ziele besit ende beweeghet natuerlijcke ende overnatuerlijcke’).

⁷⁸ *Espousals* 617–24: ‘Compassie doet den mensche lijden ende doghen met Cristum in sinen doghene also die mensche merket die waromme sijnder pinen, die wise ende sine ghelatenheit; die minne, die wonden, sine teederheyt; die smerte, die scaemte, sine edelheit; die alinde, die scande, sine versmaetheit; die croone, die naghelen, sine goedertierenheit; verderven ende sterven in verduldicheit. Dese onghehoerde menichfoudighe pine Cristi ons verlossers ende ons brudegoms, die beweeghet den goedertieren mensche in compassien ende in ontfermicheiden met Cristo.’ Quotation *Realm* 753–55.

The builder of a cathedral could not begin to imitate the perfection of Creation in stone, nor could a writer do so in words. Both, however, could attempt to produce a balanced composition aimed at approaching God's order in a higher reality. Harmonious proportions were a prerequisite to beauty and enjoyment, wrote Bonaventure. The mind, naturally drawn to beauty, climbed more easily towards God along paths of stylistic artistry.⁷⁹

This mystical aesthetic, which was deeply rooted in medieval thought, had a great impact on the meaning attributed to art and literature. *The Realm of Lovers* is full of variations on Creation's *chierheit* – the meaning of the Middle Dutch *chierheit* includes both enrichment and adornment – as it appears in the harmony of the universe and the disposition of psychic powers. When writing the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec seemed less intent on striving for beauty, but this in no way denies the importance of 'adornment'. The oldest Middle Dutch record of the text (by Brother Gerard) is particularly revealing: 'On the adornment of the spiritual espousals' (*Vander chierheit der gheesteliker brulocht*). This title corresponds exactly to the one Willem Jordaens gave to his Latin translation of the work: *De ornatu nuptiarum spiritualium*. Perhaps we have stumbled here across the original and official name of the *Espousals*, although in the manuscript culture of Ruusbroec's century authors did not necessarily give titles to the texts they sent out into the world. Treatises were often handed down with a designation derived from the opening. The oldest traceable inscription on the *Espousals* reads 'On a spiritual espousal between God and our nature' (*Van eere gheesteliker brulocht tusschen gode ende onse natuere*), which was actually the subject of Ruusbroec's introduction. The text makes no mention whatsoever of 'espousal', in contrast to the many occurrences of 'adornment'. Thus we may conclude that the current title – *The Spiritual Espousals* – was not the author's intention but rather the result of text transmission in a manuscript culture.⁸⁰

Just as *chierheit* disappeared from the title of the *Espousals*, later on in the study of Ruusbroec's mysticism there was a decline in the attention

⁷⁹ Wackers 1996c. See Gillespie 1982, pp. 211–12, on the passage from Bonaventure; see also Assunto 1963, pp. 106–08 and Reckermann 1992.

⁸⁰ For a differing view regarding the title of the *Espousals*, see the commentary to the critical edition (pp. 605–06), and cf. the glossary for occurrences of *sieren* and *sierheit*. See De Vreese 1895, p. 14, for the mention in Brother Gerard. Cf. Willaert 1995, pp. 54–55, on the titles of Ruusbroec's works given in the manuscripts.

paid to the literary character of his work – though it had started out so well. According to Willem Jonckbloet, the first professor of Middle Dutch literature, Ruusbroec's writings are characterised 'by the intensity and intimacy of language and imagery'. That was quite a compliment, considering its source. Given the aesthetic standards of Jonckbloet (who was much more attuned to the romantic than the religious), Middle Dutch prose could not really claim to be literature, though in the case of Ruusbroec he was willing to make an exception: 'They [Ruusbroec's writings] are also noteworthy for their fluent style, which justifies Ruusbroec's claim to the name of "the Netherlands' best prose writer of the Middle Ages".' This title was, of course, never claimed by the author himself; Jonckbloet was alluding to the introduction written in 1858 by the Flemish priest Jan Baptiste David to his multi-volumed edition of Ruusbroec's works, in which he placed the mystic 'at the head... of our medieval prose writers' and just as resolutely stated 'that from a literary perspective his works could be called the most beautiful'. Gerrit Kalf, who in his 1906 history of Dutch literature was more enthusiastic about the prose tradition than Jonckbloet had been, applauded Ruusbroec's works as 'one of the highest peaks in our literary landscape'. After this, however, the climate worsened.⁸¹

Ruusbroec's texts began to suffer from the persistently held view of the fourteenth century as a period in which Dutch literature was driven out of the Realm of Beauty and placed in the Shackles of Didacticism. It was the Flemish literary historian and Hadewijch-admirer Van Mierlo who managed, with a single stroke of the pen, to elevate the earliest period in literary history to an aristocratic art, rising above the fourteenth-century patriciate's need for education. Perhaps Van Mierlo had been prompted to do this by his fixed idea about developments in mystical literature, in which he had observed the most dramatic changes. Compared with Hadewijch's superior skill, Ruusbroec got bogged down in long-drawn-out discourses, competently composed though they were. All the musicality, rhythm, tension and expressiveness that Van Mierlo so admired in the beguine's work he sought in vain in the *Espousals*. When Ruusbroec's words did testify to great feeling, they were not his own: 'He took them, with all their expressive power, with all their

⁸¹ See Jonckbloet 1889, vol. II, pp. 394–99; David 1858, vol. I, p. xxxvi; Kalf 1906, p. 408. A survey of views on Ruusbroec as a prose writer can be found in Noë 1984.

ardency of feeling, from the gold mine of mystical language handed down to him by Hadewijch.' Ruusbroec's abundance of words, praised in the past as the 'revelation of his mystical immersion', was in Van Mierlo's eyes more a sign of incompetence. He particularly disapproved of the surfeit of dependent clauses: 'Let us simply admit that all those instances of *ende* [and] and *want* [because]... must be explained by the fact that Ruusbroec still knew little of the art of prose.'

Such unmasking of beauty was a rare occurrence in Dutch literary studies of the Middle Ages, and it is all the more baffling when one considers that Van Mierlo wrote these lines in the volume compiled in 1931 to commemorate the 550th anniversary of Ruusbroec's death. In his later history of Middle Dutch literature, Van Mierlo showed his more amiable side, but the damage had already been done. While the internationally famous medievalist Jean Leclercq attributed to Ruusbroec the same *charisme du style* as Bernard of Clairvaux, Dutch scholars generally expressed admiration for the *Espousals* only because of its content.⁸²

The consensus, meanwhile, is that modern ideas about the aesthetic aspect of literature do not necessarily apply to medieval texts. Instead of judging a work's artistic merits, critics have begun to consider the functionality of its form. A reassessment of Ruusbroec as a writer, however, has not been forthcoming. 'Is de *Brulocht* literatuur?' (Is the *Espousals* literature?) is the ominous title of a lecture given by Frank Willaert at a symposium held in 1993, this time to commemorate Ruusbroec's 700th birthday. Applying post-modern concepts to Middle Dutch literature, Willaert defused the problem posed in his title by questioning the definition of 'literature' itself. Ruusbroec had no intention of writing literature in the modern sense. In the Middle Ages one did not entertain the ideas of artistic autonomy that nowadays determine notions of art: the manuscript culture strove to provide information and to convey ideas. This did not rehabilitate Ruusbroec, however, because Willaert was not seeking the *chierheit* in the *Espousals* but rather attempting to ascertain the effectiveness of Ruusbroec's stylistic devices.

⁸² See Van Mierlo 1931 for the attack on Ruusbroec, quotations on pp. 189 and 187, respectively; a more balanced view is found in Van Mierlo 1950, p. 62. For the quotation, see Leclercq 1957, p. 247. Remarkably, there is more admiration for Ruusbroec outside the circle of professional scholars of Dutch literature. See, for instance, Vermeylen 1941 and Westerlinck 1981; cf. Knuvelde 1978, pp. 249–65 (largely following Van Mierlo). It was not until Noë's studies (resulting in her dissertation, Noë 2001) that interest was again shown (since Schilling 1930) in Ruusbroec as a literary figure.

Willaert explained the practice – so abhorrent to Van Mierlo – of using coordinating conjunctions as a means of providing clear structure to audiences who in those days were much more likely to experience literature as listeners rather than as readers. The orderly presentation, recapitulations, twin concepts and deductive method supposedly helped to clarify the complicated subject matter. This is undoubtedly true to some extent, but anyone judging the composition of the *Espousals* primarily on the basis of a functional aspect such as comprehensibility does as little justice to Ruusbroec's intentions as Van Mierlo did with his overly aesthetic assessment.⁸³

Apart from its content, the *Espousals* differs from the didactic tenor of Middle Dutch literature in its divergent methods and techniques. Jan van Boendale took great pains in *Der leken spiegel* (*The Layman's Mirror*) to facilitate the transmission of knowledge by dividing his work into books with chapters, headings and tables of contents. The *Espousals* was probably not even divided into chapters. In any case, what Ruusbroec had in mind when creating the complex architecture of his work was more than just a chapter-by-chapter discussion of a clearly defined subject. The author of the *Espousals* sought to prepare his readers for the spiritual exercises and meditation 'by which a person is lifted up and enriched as to his affection'.⁸⁴

Ruusbroec's approach is primarily evocative, inviting readers to marvel at the ease with which each element of spiritual life fits into a larger whole. That insight makes one receptive to the stream of concepts and stylistic devices which carry one's ideas along in a lengthy series of spiritual exercises that flow naturally into one another as soon as Christ's entry into the soul has kindled the inner fire. This leads to unity of heart, which brings inner peace, thus creating room for the introspection by which one becomes aware of the fire of love sparked by the spirit of God. Thus the soul is 'touched from within by eternal love, which it is forced to practice'.⁸⁵ From this arises in turn the devotion that 'stirs and stokes' (*rueret ende stoket*) one from within to the service of God, which in turn prompts one to thank and praise the Lord.

⁸³ Willaert 1995, esp. pp. 60–63; cf. Kalf 1906, p. 398.

⁸⁴ *Espousals* b476–77: 'daer die mensche met ghehoghet ende gheciert wert nader affectien'. See Piters 2002 on Boendale's chapter divisions and tables of contents.

⁸⁵ *Espousals* b273: 'gherenen van binnen met eewigher minnen diere si emmer pleghen moet'.

This deductive method is not used to further comprehensibility; rather, it is a stylistic device employed to stimulate in the reader feelings of interiorisation, reverence and devotion. Ruusbroec compares the movement of the soul with water that bubbles up as it nears the boiling point and then subsides, only to be stirred up again by the force of the fire: 'The inward fire of the Holy Spirit works in like manner: it drives, stokes and spurs the heart and all the faculties of the soul to a boil.'⁸⁶

The many conjunctions used in the *Espousals* are not due to stylistic incompetence; rather, they are one of the means by which Ruusbroec sought to appeal to his readers' affective faculties. Feelings are mobilised by the literary figure of Christ's coming into the soul, which 'drives and impels a person affectively from within, and it draws a person with all his faculties upwards to heaven and compels him to have unity with God'. Driving, spurring, drawing upwards, compelling – the *Espousals* is full of language that moves the spirit and makes it receptive to the higher things in life.⁸⁷

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Despite the appreciation shown for the architecture of the *Espousals*, recognition of Ruusbroec's style and 'poetic creation' would be a welcome development. Still, there is no question that the honourable mention of the *Espousals* in the international tradition of religious literature is due to its abstract reflections on a union with God. The magisterial nature of the text reveals itself when the author no longer appeals to the imagination. Those seeking to approach God may not indulge in protracted consideration of ideas, images or outward manifestations. They must proceed from these 'activities to their ultimate reason, and from the signs to the truth' (*vanden werken toe der waeromme ende vanden teekenen toe der waerheit*).

On the path from the visible to the absolute, the mind enters a world of ideas conceived by an intellect enlightened by God, where metaphors, or 'sensible images' (*senlijcke ghelijcke*) serve only to refer to the abstract truth of a 'fathomless good without mode' (*een grondeloes goet zonder*

⁸⁶ See *Espousals* b212–346 for the passage discussed. Quotation *Espousals* b339–41: 'Alsoe ghelijckerwijs werket dat inwindighe vier dies heylichs gheests: het drivet ende stoket ende jaghet dat herte ende alle die crachte der zielen toe den walle'.

⁸⁷ *Espousals* b167–70: 'die drivet ende jaghet den mensche gevoelijc van binnen ende si trect den mensec met alle den crachten opweert te hemele ende eyscht hem eenicheit te hebbene met gode'.

wise). The closer Ruusbroec gets to the highest faculties of the human intellect, the more metaphors lose their function and expressiveness. Although the divine touch ‘in the innermost [depths] of our spirit’ (*in dat innichste ons gheests*) is still compared with the source of a spring from which three rivers flow to the memory, the intellect and the will, there are no suitable images for the condition of the mind which, in its pure essence, perceives God’s presence as ‘the essential bareness where everything . . . depicted in the mirror of divine truth’ disappears, or as a ‘bottomless whirlpool of simplicity’ (*grondelosen wiele der simpelheit*).⁸⁸

Staring into ‘the dark stillness in which all those who love are lost’ (*die doncker stille daer alle minnende in sijn verloren*), the mystic beholds only an absolute essence that exists in itself and is sufficient unto itself. To give an impression of this state of being, mystical writers use a language full of antitheses and paradoxes that intentionally undermine the meaning of the words – not in order to magnify the enigmatic notion of God, but simply because the Supreme Being is beyond all human understanding. On this point Ruusbroec conformed to generally accepted notions of transcendental theology. What distinguished him as a mystic, however, is that he seemingly knew what happened when the mind rose above all abstraction to be swallowed up by the divine source of all being.⁸⁹

Only a chosen few experience the special grace of the ‘superessential contemplation’ (*overweselijcken scouwene*) that Ruusbroec describes in the third part of the *Espousals*, though he does not actually say much about it. Ruusbroec could not be other than brief on a subject that defies verbalisation:

For all the words and everything that one can learn and understand in a creaturely fashion is alien to, and far beneath, the truth that I have in mind. But he who is united with God and enlightened in this truth can understand the truth through [the truth] itself.⁹⁰

Given the self-contained nature of such passages, it should come as no surprise that the last part of the *Espousals* represents less than ten

⁸⁸ See *Espousals* b1860–62, b1008–44, b1467 and c242–48, respectively.

⁸⁹ *Espousals* c253. On the language of mysticism, see Haas 1979, esp. pp. 27–33; Minnis 1983; Haug 1986; Reynaert 1991; Gillespie 1992.

⁹⁰ *Espousals* c30–c34: ‘Want alle waerde ende al datmen creatuerlijckerwijs leren ende verstaen mach, dat es verre beneden der waerheit die ic meyne. Maer die vereenicht es met gode ende verclaert in deser waerheit, hi mach die waerheit met haer selven verstaen.’

per cent of the total text. Nonetheless, these are the boldest pages, and Ruusbroec was well aware that he might arouse scepticism and suspicion by asserting that no one would be able to fathom completely the thrust of his arguments, neither by means of any ‘teachings’ (*leringhe*) nor by ‘one’s own subtle consideration’ (*subtyl ghemerc sijns selfs*). Ruusbroec explicitly asked those who could not follow him on the path to higher understanding to resign themselves to their plight: ‘For what I wish to say is true, and Christ, the eternal truth, said it Himself in His teaching in many a passage, if only we could reveal it and bring it forth well.’⁹¹

The fact that Ruusbroec here speaks for himself differs markedly from the *Realm*, in which he seemed to assume that a select few were to be granted the highest bliss on earth: ‘This enjoyment is so great that in it, God and all the saints and these exalted people are swallowed up and are sunken away into modelessness.’⁹² Whatever Ruusbroec meant by ‘exalted people’ (*hooghe menschen*), he did not consider himself one of them when writing the *Realm*. By the time he had reached the last pages of the *Espousals*, however, so much had changed that he ventured to present himself as someone who had fathomed mystical truths through his own experience.

This brings us to a pivotal point in Ruusbroec’s authorship. Thus far we have followed his life within a multi-faceted context – spiritually, intellectually and socially, and from the perspective of literary history – which has shown that the climate in Brussels in the first half of the fourteenth century was conducive to writing a text like the *Espousals*. But has this brought us close enough to Ruusbroec to allow us to say *why* he began to write? Was he simply seeking to share his spiritual riches with others? Or did he feel compelled to expound his view of a subject that was close to his heart, as his contribution to an ongoing discussion among theologians, clerics and lay people?

Of course we do Ruusbroec an injustice if we try to explain his *Espousals* merely as a product of his times. That would be as unwarranted as considering this balanced and well-considered work merely the result of a spectacular and compelling spiritual life. Ruusbroec did

⁹¹ *Espousals* c30–32 and 40–41: ‘Want dat ic spreken wille dat es waer, ende Christus die eewighe waerheit hevet selve ghesproken in sire leeren op menighe stadt, waert alsoe dat wijt wel openbaren ende voertbringhen consten.’

⁹² *Realm* 99/28–30: ‘Dat ghebruyken es soe groot dat god ende alle heylighen ende dese hooghe menschen hier in verswolghen ende versmolten in onwisen.’

not write with a view to sharing his experiences. The driving force behind spiritual authors is more complicated than that. In committing their ideas to parchment, they put their credibility at stake. Some legitimate their authorship by claiming higher sources of inspiration, a good example being Hadewijch's seventeenth letter, in which she begins with several lessons in life, and then emphasises that God has ordered her to instruct her audience in these matters. The underlying thought is that those who have been chosen by God to be His messengers have the right to speak about heavenly affairs. Ruusbroec travels this path in reverse, for the *Espousals* seems to have been written to demonstrate his credibility. Its composition alone is an indication of this: Ruusbroec begins with general religious truths, slowly working his way up to more exclusive themes. The *Espousals* has a biblical foundation. Ruusbroec sought a universal truth in scripture, on the basis of a single passage, which he wished to 'expound' (*dieden*), 'explain' (*ontbinden*) and 'clarify' (*verclaren*). These are verbs describing activities in the sphere of exegesis, instruction and study. Ruusbroec presented himself in the *Espousals* as a thinker and explorer, not as a visionary or preacher.⁹³

The *Espousals* was Ruusbroec's way of presenting his credentials. From the moment that interested parties were free to make copies of the text, his position changed fundamentally. The masterpiece with which Ruusbroec made his debut turned him into a public figure. Some were gripped by the text and placed their confidence in the author as a spiritual guide. Others studied the *Espousals* closely, in the hope of determining whether Ruusbroec was really entitled to the authority of someone who spoke a divine truth. Still others entered into a discussion with the mystic out of theological interest. When the fame of the *Espousals* – and the name of the author – became even more widespread, Ruusbroec soon found himself surrounded by both admirers and critics. He was forced to deal with recognition and dissent, approval and condemnation – and myriad questions regarding the path towards perfection. Ruusbroec eventually provided his answers in a whole series of treatises. Clearly, the *Espousals* marked the true beginning of his life as an author.

⁹³ Cf. *Espousals* 47, b11 and c24. See Minnis 1997, pp. 267–73. On the interpretation of *ontbinden*, cf. Van Oostrom 1996a, pp. 420–21. Quotation Hadewijch in Van Mierlo 1947, 140/11–12. Regarding her claim to authority, see Warnar 1998 (despite the comments in Fraeters 1999).

CHAPTER III

‘THIS AUTHOR IS CALLED JAN VAN RUUSBROEC’

1. Inspired Authorship

In 1624 appeared the first – and for a long time the only – printed edition of the *Espousals* in Dutch. The work itself was preceded by the ‘life and miracles of the author’ (*leven ende miraculen des autheurs*) and followed by solemn verses ‘To praise and honour the worthy father and extraordinary visionary Jan van Ruusbroec’ (*Tot lof ende eer des weerdighen vaders ende uutmementer schouwer Johannis Ruysbrochis*). The person who signed the volume as editor and poet was ‘a lover of Christ’ (*eenen liefhebber Christi*), later identified as Gabriël van Antwerpen – a Capuchin monk, man of letters and correspondent of the renowned Dutch poet P.C. Hooft, but above all an advocate of the preservation of the Catholic literary heritage. As a philologist, Gabriël van Antwerpen was taking no chances. To be sure, he had adapted Ruusbroec’s Middle Dutch to the ‘changes wrought by time’ (*veranderinghe des tijts*), but only, it would seem, after consulting various copies of the *Espousals*. Despite these philological efforts, what Van Antwerpen’s work illustrates above all is that it was Ruusbroec’s image as an author, more so than his words, that was subject to the changes wrought by time.¹

The title page speaks volumes (see fig. 5). Ruusbroec is portrayed sitting beneath a tree, holding a wax tablet containing the opening words of the *Espousals* in Latin: *Ecce sponsus venit*. This reference to Ruusbroec’s literary work pales in comparison to the heavenly light shining down on the mystic, which is so intense that it has set fire to the branches above his head. The wax tablet – the pre-eminent attribute of the medieval author – is only of decorative value. Ruusbroec turns away from his writings to bask in the divine light of inspiration.

The representation is in keeping with an iconographic tradition that began with the oldest portrait of the mystic: the full-page miniature in

¹ See Ampe 1950 on Gabriël van Antwerpen and the printed edition of the *Espousals*, with an edition of the poem; additions and corrections in Hildebrand 1954. See also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 114.

the Groenendaal codex of Ruusbroec's works (see cover illustration). There, too, the author, holding a wax tablet and a lead stylus, is seated beneath a tree in the company of the Holy Spirit, hovering above his head in the form of a white dove. This setting was often used in the Middle Ages to portray inspired authors. The wooded surroundings symbolised the author's seclusion as he sought to concentrate on his creative work, while the dove was a conventional symbol of divine inspiration. The title page of the 1624 *Espousals* displays heavenly sunbeams rather than the more traditional iconography of the dove, but it differs from the Groenendaal miniature mainly in its omission of a second scene – present in the earlier manuscript but lacking in the seventeenth-century edition – showing the mystic at the next stage of the writing process: seated at his desk, fashioning his ideas into the constructs that will underpin treatises such as the *Espousals*.

To understand this second scene, one must realise that there is a historical dimension to the ultra-conventional staging of the Groenendaal depiction. Pomerius relates that Ruusbroec was indeed accustomed to withdraw into the woods around the priory 'whenever he was illuminated by the heavenly rays of spiritual contemplation'. On these occasions Ruusbroec took along wax tablets to record the wisdom infused by the Holy Spirit. Returning with tablets full of writing, Ruusbroec worked up his rough sketches into definitive texts: 'He thus tended, with long interruptions, to make notes of things which afterwards stood in the proper order (*met goeder ordinancien*) in his books.' This second phase in the composition of Ruusbroec's works is apparently highlighted in the scene of the mystic at his desk. Until now, the depiction has not been connected with Pomerius's words, perhaps because the passage – quoted from the Dutch version of *De origine* – has no counterpart in the much better studied Latin original. There is, however, no reason to doubt the authenticity of Pomerius's statement. Moments of enlightenment were necessarily followed by the more plodding aspects of writing, which even a great mind like Ruusbroec could not avoid.²

The Groenendaal miniature sheds light on both phases of the writing process. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Ruusbroec made his first

² Quotation Verdeyen 1981b, p. 148 (cf. De Leu 1885, p. 293). For the miniature and the manuscript, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 42 and 183. On the interpretation of the author miniature, see Warnar 1997a, p. 143 and Warnar 2000a, pp. 683–84. On the Ruusbroec iconography, see Ampe 1974; Ampe 1981b; exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 368–70 and nos. 183–220.

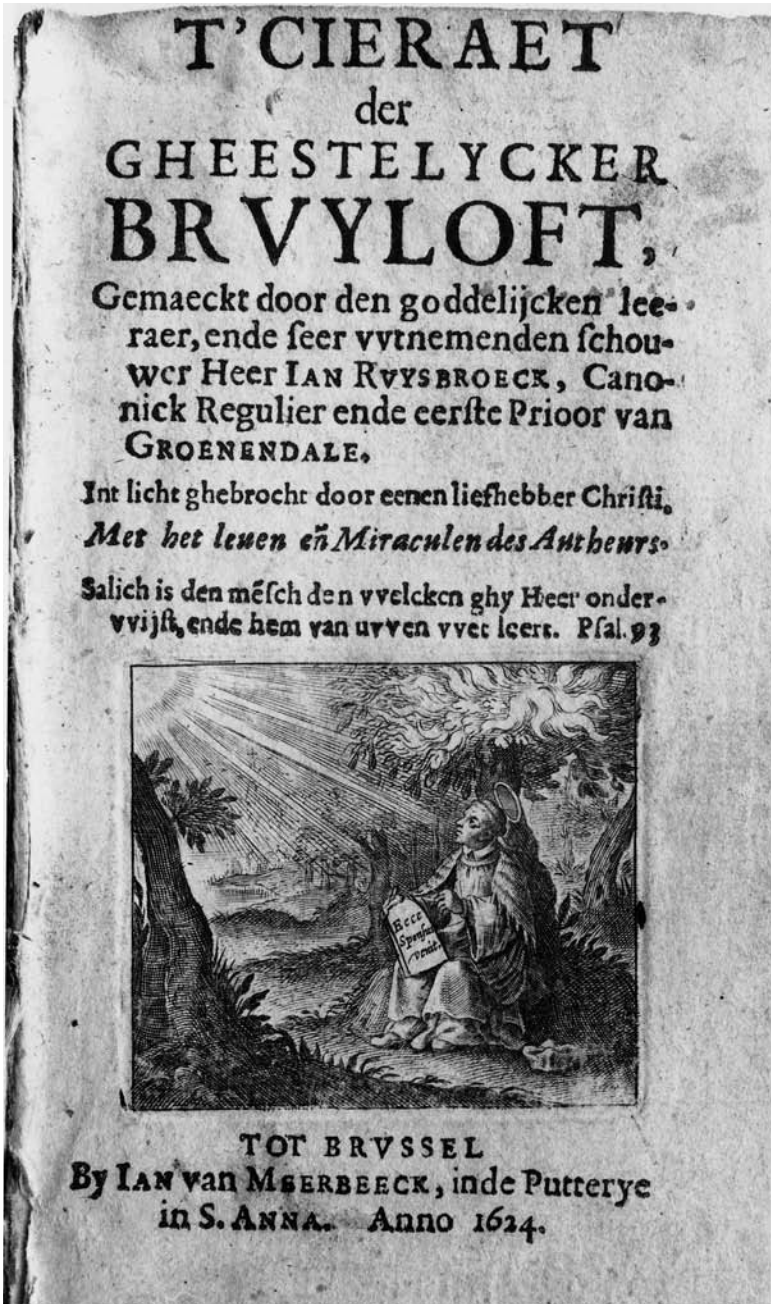


Fig. 5 Title page of the Dutch edition of the *Espousals* printed in 1624.

notes in the seclusion of the Zonien Forest, but the composition of his great works required more space than that provided by a wax tablet. The complicated structure of the *Realm* and the universally praised architectonic construction of the *Espousals* were the result of written forms of composition full of cross references, summaries, divisions and intentional repetitions. This tinkering with the text was not something Ruusbroec did in the forest with a wax tablet balanced on his knee. The attentive viewer sees at the lower right of the miniature how the author – seated at a Groenendaal lectern, his wax tablet within easy reach – reworks his notes into stylised treatises on parchment. The little monk seated at the desk is usually thought to be the scribe responsible for recording the definitive version of Ruusbroec's texts. Such assistance was very common in medieval manuscript production. Most authors did not produce the official copies of their texts themselves. The formal calligraphy of the *textualis* demanded such fine workmanship that Ruusbroec no doubt handed the work over to a professional or in any case a very skilful scribe – perhaps the *notarius* we met earlier in connection with the *Realm*. However, this professional scribe did not work from notes jotted down on wax tablets; Ruusbroec supplied him with a much more polished and cohesive text.³ All things considered, it is likely that in the second scene we again see Ruusbroec the author.

When interpreted as a double portrait, the Groenendaal miniature becomes one of the most detailed medieval depictions of the two stages in creative writing: inspiration and technique, which were discussed in the compositional handbooks commonly used at that time as the *forma tractatus* (the invention of the idea) and the *forma tractandi* (its treatment). It is typical of the changing perception of Ruusbroec as an author that later depictions showed only the mystic beneath the tree, completely engrossed in his 'inward contemplation' (*inweyndiger contemplacien*). Just as the author seated at the lectern literally disappeared from the picture, the idea that there must have been more to Ruusbroec's carefully structured works than a stroll in the woods and 'what he received as inspiration there from the Holy Spirit' also faded into the background.

³ See Saenger 1982, pp. 384–91 and 1997, pp. 257–58, on the composition of texts, which was done increasingly in writing in the late Middle Ages, this development being tied to the growing complexity of scholastic literature. Ruusbroec's work seems to be the most obvious and certainly the earliest example in Middle Dutch. On the use of wax tablets for making notes, see Rouse & Rouse 1989, esp. p. 220. On author portraits, see Wenzel 1998, esp. pp. 7–9 and Meier 2000, esp. pp. 365–69, on the inspired author. Cf. also Peters 2000, p. 335.

As a rule Ruusbroec must have had by his lectern not only a wax tablet but also a book.⁴

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The fact that the *Espousals* radiates quite a bit of theological expertise is not at odds with the medieval notion that the author owed his insights to the Holy Spirit. For writers of Ruusbroec's time, inspiration was almost by definition a gift from above. It is important to see this as the seed of Ruusbroec's authorship and not as the all-defining factor that it became in the eyes of later admirers such as Gabriël van Antwerpen.

It was mainly Ruusbroec's Groenendaal heirs who were responsible for the shift in his reputation from author to mystic, though this image had taken shape much earlier and had been consolidated by more general developments. The gradual drifting apart of theology and spirituality at the end of the fourteenth century also signalled the end of the long-cherished notion of a union of science and wisdom. *Scientia* and *sapientia* became separate categories. How that influenced the perception of Ruusbroec and his mysticism is seen in the work of the Carthusian monk Dionysius van Rijkel, an author who reached the height of his immensely prolific career around the mid-fifteenth century. Dionysius claimed that knowledge acquired through study and reason (*scientia*) could never match the wisdom derived from religious experience (*sapientia*). He called as his crown witness Jan van Ruusbroec, whom he pitted against none other than the standard-bearer of scholasticism: Thomas Aquinas. Dionysius considered Ruusbroec's God-given wisdom superior to the knowledge that philosophers acquired by exercising their intellectual faculties.⁵

Dionysius was known in his day as the most widely read man in Christendom, which lent his opinion a certain authority. A great sigh of relief must have gone up in Groenendaal when Dionysius gave short shrift to Gerson, whom he upbraided for his inattentive reading of the *Espousals*. Ruusbroec, by contrast, was praised repeatedly in the most glowing terms: just as Hugh of St Victor was called a second Augustine

⁴ Quotation Verdeyen 1981b, p. 148: 'tghene dat hem daer vanden heiligen geest waert gheinspireert'. On the interpretation of the miniature, see Warnar 1997a. For a detailed discussion of meditation as the starting point of the compositional process and on the *forma tractatus* and the *forma tractandi*, see Carruthers 1991, pp. 189–220; cf. the application of this theory to the work of Ruusbroec in Willaert 1993b.

⁵ Emery 1988, pp. 125–34. On Dionysius and Ruusbroec, see also Ampe 1975a, pp. 359–62 and Verdeyen 1995b, pp. 8–9.

because of his *scientia*, Ruusbroec's *sapientia* earned him the name of a second Dionysius – and naturally the Carthusian was not referring to himself but to his famous namesake Dionysius the Aereopagite. The Groenendaal friars gratefully filed the words of Dionysius van Rijkel among their Ruusbroec documents; later Laurentius Surius of Cologne approvingly quoted his fellow Carthusian in his edition of Ruusbroec's *Opera Omnia*. As a result the contribution of a third Carthusian was long relegated to the shadows – even though it is his view of Ruusbroec's authorship that deserves the most attention.⁶

Before 1365 the previously mentioned Brother Gerard of Saintes, a Carthusian at the monastery in Herne, had written an introduction to his copy of five of Ruusbroec's texts: the *Realm*, the *Espousals*, the *Stone*, the *Tabernacle* and the *Booklet of Clarification*. Brother Gerard's book is now lost, but the two surviving copies of his prologue are still of value to Ruusbroec philology. Brother Gerard supplies not only factual details about the treatises, but also important information on the life of Ruusbroec and the reception of his works. The *pièce de résistance* consists of Brother Gerard's personal recollections of the mystic's three-day visit to Herne. Brother Gerard paints a picture of an amiable man who exchanged thoughts with his hosts without the slightest boasting about his celebrated works. The Carthusians were deeply impressed by Ruusbroec's appearance, attitude and demeanour: 'There were many religious sentiments worthy of emulation: his mature and happy countenance, his benevolent and humble speech, his pious bearing and his religious attitude in his habits and in everything he did.'⁷

Because these biographical details enliven Ruusbroec's portrait, it is easy to overlook the nature of Brother Gerard's prologue, which was not

⁶ Regarding the dissemination of the panegyric, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 359–62. A copy of the Groenendaal codex of Ruusbroec's works also contains Dionysius's panegyric (see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 44 and De Vreese 1900–02, pp. 44–55, transcription on p. 50). An indication that the text was copied from a Groenendaal manuscript is an emendation in the original *primo priore hujus monasterii Viridisvallis* by the scribe, who crossed out the word *hujus*.

⁷ Brother Gerard's prologue has survived in two manuscripts containing the works of Ruusbroec. See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 43 and 45, as well as De Vreese 1895, pp. 6–20, for the edition, quotation on p. 12: 'Daer waren veel religioesheden af te scriven: van sinen ripen ende bliden aensiene, van sinen goedertieren ende oetmoedighen spreken, van sinen geesteliken uutwendighen wesen ende van sinen religiosen hebben in sinen habite ende in alle sinen doen.' On the text, see Warnar 1993b, pp. 170–71; Mertens 1995b, pp. 66–69 (with a summary of the older literature in note 3); Verdeyen 1995b, pp. 6–7. Regarding Brother Gerard, see also Seynnaeve 1995 and Kwakkel & Mulder 2001, p. 161, n. 36.

merely a report of the mystic's visit. It was, rather, an *accessus ad auctorem*, a formal discourse written along the lines of an academic prologue. The *accessus* was a formal introduction aimed at facilitating the further study of truly important works. In an *accessus*, an attempt was made to deal systematically with the particulars of a text: the author, the title, the subjects discussed and with what intention, the purpose of the work and so on. Brother Gerard did not follow the technical form of an *accessus* very closely, but his introduction to Ruusbroec is easily recognisable as a rare Middle Dutch example of the genre. The Carthusian gives an impression of Ruusbroec as a person and as a writer, discusses how his works came about, and assesses the content and tone of the texts and their importance in acquiring knowledge and wisdom. In examining the usefulness of Ruusbroec's work, Brother Gerard focuses on the value of religious literature in the vernacular, in this case Middle Dutch. All things considered, the prologue contains a wealth of information. If, however, we regard Brother Gerard's contribution on its own as a conventional *accessus*, what is most striking is that the Carthusian even thought Ruusbroec worthy of a learned introduction.⁸

'This author is called Jan van Ruusbroec' (*Desen auctor hiet her Jan van Ruysbroeck*), wrote Brother Gerard. His recognition of Ruusbroec as an *auctor* is a veiled tribute which should not be taken lightly. According to medieval notions of authorship, *auctor* was the highest rank in a hierarchy in which lesser positions were reserved for – in descending order – commentator, compiler and scribe. Their rankings were determined by the degree of independence with which they participated in text production. The scribe was someone who copied works slavishly; the compiler collected and arranged material written by others, assembling it into a new whole; the commentator supplied existing texts with explanation, and did so in part according to his own lights. The *auctor* was distinguished from all of them as the one who had something new to add to existing knowledge.⁹

Ruusbroec was the first and presumably the only Middle Dutch *auctor* to whom an *accessus* was devoted. Despite the innovation, originality and enthusiasm demonstrated by authors writing in the language of the Low Countries, even the most prominent representatives were ranked

⁸ On the prologue as an *accessus*, see Warnar 1997b, p. 141 and Sonnemans 1995, p. 36. Cf. in general Minnis 1984, esp. pp. 16–17.

⁹ Minnis 1984, pp. 94–95.

no higher than commentator. Ruusbroec alone, in fact, occupied the lonely heights of Middle Dutch letters, and on this point the *accessus* and author iconography are equally clear. Jacob van Maerlant – who penned a series of Dutch adaptations of such learned Latin works as *De natura rerum*, *Historia scolastica* and *Speculum historiale* – was always portrayed with an open book in front of him, a sign that he had borrowed his wisdom from others. The theology professor and court chaplain Dirc van Delft was also portrayed as an exponent of recorded knowledge. Ruusbroec, by contrast, was depicted with a wax tablet containing his own notes lying on a lectern – notes which were the fruit of an enlightened intellectual life.

In the eyes of Brother Gerard, Ruusbroec owed his *auctoritas* neither to great knowledge nor to scholarly merits, but to wisdom conferred by the Holy Spirit – not *scientia*, therefore, but *sapientia*. That, at least, was the assumption of the Carthusian, who had brought all his intellectual powers to bear on the study of Ruusbroec's writings but had not succeeded in fathoming them fully. Nonetheless, he did not doubt the credibility of Ruusbroec's words, 'for just as the Holy Spirit inspires open and easily comprehensible writings, thus we are instructed effortlessly'.¹⁰

With the solemn simplicity of this conclusion, Brother Gerard silenced his own doubts. This emerges from a dedicatory letter accompanying the Latin translation of the *Tabernacle*, of which the opening words and a few sentence fragments have accidentally been preserved in a seventeenth-century bibliographic note. Both the translation and the letter were by the Groenendaal canon Willem Jordaens, who had earlier been responsible for the controversial Latin version of the *Espousals*. The letter, addressed to 'Brother Gerard' (*frater Gerarde*), referred to the Carthusian's otherwise unspecified reservations concerning the author of the *Tabernacle*. Jordaens's answer to those reservations is a *tour de force* of rhetorical refinement. The biblical commandment 'Judge none blessed before his death' (Ecclesiasticus 11:28) prevented him from mentioning the holiness of the author in question, which is why Jordaens confined himself to a discussion of Ruusbroec's writings, for one could instantly see that the mystic's teachings could not have been derived from human knowledge or scholarship but only from divine wisdom, which had been

¹⁰ De Vreese 1895, pp. 11–12: 'want alsoe die heylighe gheest opene ende lichte leringhe doet scriven, soe werden wi daer in gheleert sonder onse pine'.

communicated to him by the grace of God. As far as Brother Gerard was concerned, that was enough to prove Ruusbroec's *auctoritas*.¹¹

Jordaens certainly knew what he was talking about – and perhaps that was only to be expected from someone who had translated important works by Ruusbroec. The great Latinist among the Groenendaal canons, Jordaens seemed destined to act as the mystic's spokesman in the world of learning. He was therefore given a key role to fulfil. Long before Gerson caused so much consternation at Groenendaal, the discussion of Ruusbroec's writings had begun to focus more and more on his special inspiration. That debate took place not in the twilight zone of religion and literature but in the arena of theology – and in Latin, the language of learning. Even the Middle Dutch of Brother Gerard's prologue does not detract from the academic nature of this scholarly debate. The Carthusian's prologue reveals him to be a trained cleric, who discussed Ruusbroec's works within the theoretical framework of an *accessus*. Jordaens and Schoonhoven also referred to the prevailing theories of knowledge and wisdom when assessing Ruusbroec as an *auctor*. The mystic's most ardent admirers, however, needed nothing but his words.

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Pomerius tells of a meeting in Groenendaal between Ruusbroec and Geert Grote, the Northern Netherlandish leader of the *Devotio Moderna*. Grote expressed surprise at the fact that the mystic held fast to certain notions which critical readers of this writings found difficult to accept. Ruusbroec's answer probably did nothing to ease Grote's mind: 'Master Geert, know for certain that I never wrote anything save at the behest of the Holy Spirit' (*Meyster Geraert, wet dat waerlijck dat ic noyt yet en screef dan biden ingeve des heiligen geestes*). Great importance was attached to Ruusbroec's words. Pomerius recorded another version that was making the rounds. Someone else at Groenendaal thought that the mystic had said: 'In my books I have never written save in the presence of the Holy Trinity' (*Ic en heb in minen boeken nyet gescreven dan*

¹¹ On the translation of the *Tabernacle* and the dedicatory letter, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 40, 329–34. The seventeenth-century bibliographer Miraeus, to whose work we owe these lines, thought that the letter was addressed to Geert Grote (see also De Baere 1996b), though he was never a *frater*. Brother Gerard's prologue reveals, moreover, that he was particularly interested in the *Tabernacle*.

in die teghenwoerdicheit der heyligher drievoudicheit). Pomerius, moreover, was acquainted with confrères of Ruusbroec who maintained that he had left them these words as his last will and testament. This is possibly a relic of the first Ruusbroec *vita* written by Jan van Schoonhoven. In any case, a Middle Dutch version of the story gives him as the source. Furthermore, in his letter to Gerson, Schoonhoven had also contended that Ruusbroec wrote his works without ‘the labour of study’ (*labore studii*), depending entirely on the grace of the Holy Spirit, as the mystic’s faithful followers well knew.¹²

One of these disciples was Jan van Leeuwen, the first cook at Groenendaal and by far the most intriguing figure among Ruusbroec’s followers – if only because he began to write, in imitation of his master. The texts written by this mystically inspired lay brother testify to his tempestuous religiosity, which Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance managed to steer into calmer waters. Van Leeuwen had the most profound admiration for his confessor, whom he held in higher esteem than all the rest of mankind put together: ‘But I am certainly incapable of praising and extolling his life and holy existence, for I would surely fall short of the mark. But his holy teachings give us evidence and public proof.’ Van Leeuwen’s praise of Ruusbroec does in fact resemble Jordaens’s answer to Brother Gerard, as though a collective Groenendaal standpoint had already been formulated. But Van Leeuwen’s admiration for his teacher came straight from the heart. Averse to any intellectual reservations, the candid cook had every confidence in the mystic and his ‘glorious writings’ (*gloriose scriftueren*), ‘which were created entirely from the Holy Spirit, completely in agreement with the teachings of the Holy Church’.¹³

Jan van Leeuwen was not the only one to be convinced immediately that Ruusbroec’s texts had been authorised by the Holy Spirit. That conviction was shared as early as 1350 by a company of religiously active lay people and clerics in Basel and Strasbourg. These *Gottesfreunde* (friends of God) had come into contact with Ruusbroec’s work through their spiritual leader, the Dominican preacher Johannes Tauler, who visited Ruusbroec around 1346 in Groenendaal, probably taking

¹² See Verdeyen 1981b, p. 143 (De Leu 1885, p. 289). The Middle Dutch story is to be found in De Vreese 1895, pp. 261–62. Regarding Schoonhoven’s letter, see Ampe 1975a, p. 135.

¹³ Van Leeuwen is treated in detail in IV.4. For the quotations, see De Vreese 1895, pp. 253 and 255–56.

away with him copies of the writings then available. In any case, four years later a German version of the *Espousals* was circulating among the *Gottesfreunde*, who were deeply impressed by Ruusbroec's work and described him as 'a hermit' (*waltprister*, or 'forest priest') 'from Brabant', illuminated by divine wisdom.¹⁴

Characteristically, what the *Gottesfreunde* were seeking in Ruusbroec's work were signs of his spiritual prestige. He thus played a role – unintentionally – in the legendary story of the *Gottesfreund aus dem Oberlant* (*Gottesfreund from the High Country*). In a series of mystical narratives and letters, this mysterious figure appeared as the spiritual adviser of Rulman Merswin, a converted banker from Strasbourg, who had sought to join Tauler and his *Gottesfreunde*. The many incongruities in the texts cast doubt on this character's authenticity. The protagonist seems more like a mystification devised by Merswin to lend more authority to his own writings.

Once he had been unmasked as a mere storyteller, Merswin and his texts were resolutely relegated to the sidelines of Germanic studies. Unfortunately, the literary figure of the *Gottesfreund* also faded into the background, which for years concealed the fact that this personage was unmistakably endowed with certain of Ruusbroec's traits. The *Fünfmännerbuch* (*Book of Five Men*) takes the form of a letter in which a *Gottesfreund* tells Rulman Merswin how he and four others had gone to live in a community of priests far away from the civilised world. There is a remarkable resemblance to Ruusbroec and the original circle of five – three priests and two lay brothers – who went with him to Groenendaal. The *Gottesfreund's* followers consist of the same combination of priests and lay brothers, and the cook who accompanies them is just as much a visionary as Jan van Leeuwen: during one of his raptures he stands transfixed next to the cooking pot, clutching a wooden spoon.¹⁵

¹⁴ In a German version of Ruusbroec's *On the Four Temptations*, the *Gottesfreunde* wrote the following: 'These prescribed teachings have been sent to us by the love of God through a saintly hermit, who is a priest, illuminated by divine wisdom and Holy Scripture with a pure and simple life' (*Dise vorgeschriben lere hat uns die minne gottes gesant durch einen heiligen einsiedel, der ist ein priester, mit göttlicher wisheit und mit der heiligen geschrift durchluchtet mit eime lutern einvaltigen leben*). See Mertens 1997, p. 115; cf. Eichler 1992, pp. 277–78. On the connection between Ruusbroec, Tauler and the *Gottesfreunde*, see in general Warnar 2002b.

¹⁵ Edition in Schmidt 1866, pp. 102–28; on the cook, pp. 129–30. Cf. Steer 1984, pp. 645–46. Typical of the attitude of German scholars towards the *Gottesfreunde* is the irritation shown in Haas 1987, p. 302, and the near-absence of Merswin and his texts in Ruh 1990–99 (only vol. II, p. 252 and vol. III, pp. 480 and 484).

Equally intriguing are the associations with Ruusbroec in the *Meisterbuch* (*Masterbook*), another text from Merswin's circle. The protagonist in this spiritual roman à clef is a learned preacher whom many a medieval reader recognised as Johannes Tauler. After a dramatic meeting with the *Gottesfreund*, the Master realises that all his study and books only impede spiritual life. When he speaks again in public after a retreat of many years, he shows that he has found true wisdom. His impassioned sermon sends his audience into such raptures that dozens of them fall to the ground as if struck dead. Remarkably, the theme chosen by the born-again preacher is 'Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him'. It is not only the same biblical passage that opens the *Espousals*, but the words immediately following also correspond exactly to Ruusbroec's: 'This bridegroom is Christ, and human nature is the bride.'¹⁶

The *Meisterbuch* contains many references to literary and historical realities that would not be out of place in a post-modern novel, but what begins as a clever game combining fact and fiction later takes on a grotesque form. Merswin's ideas about a superior lay mysticism swell into conceit. The letters from the *Gottesfreund* continually confirm that Merswin is on the right path: from the High Country come reports of a heavenly message to hermits and *Gottesfreunde*, who hold prayer meetings to implore God's mercy for corrupt Christendom. In 1380, at the high point of one of these spiritual sessions, a letter falls from heaven.¹⁷

Ruusbroec had apparently seen the storm brewing. In *On the Four Temptations* – possibly written with the German *Gottesfreunde* in mind – he had warned that those who let themselves be guided by things spiritual should not count on having visions, or being visited by angels and saints, or receiving from God 'a special missive with golden letters' (*enen sonderlinghen brief met gulden letteren*). The whole of the *Temptations* was prompted by Ruusbroec's foreboding (or was it first-hand knowledge?) that exaggerated expectations of the mystical life could cause would-be contemplatives to stray from the true path to divine wisdom. As far as Merswin was concerned, the message of the *Temptations* had fallen on deaf ears. His series of pious stories and epistles deteriorate into

¹⁶ For the quotations, see Schmidt 1875, p. 29: 'Sehent der brútegoume kummet, gont us ime engegene. Dirre brutegoume ist Cristus und menschliche nature ist die brut.' Cf. *Espousals* 5.

¹⁷ Gorceix 1984, pp. 102–04.

wild fantasies, none of which recalls the earnestness and reverence of Ruusbroec's treatises.¹⁸

The shifting alliances between mysticism, literature and inspired authorship could produce widely different results in the fourteenth century. Brother Gerard, Jan van Leeuwen and Rulman Merswin show how admiration for the author of the *Espousals* led – in more or less the same time frame – to a circumspect *accessus*, religious enthusiasm and bizarre fabrications. Ruusbroec was increasingly confronted with such diverse reactions to his texts and his *auctoritas*. Pomerius told of 'doctors and other great clerics',¹⁹ who came to visit Ruusbroec in Groenendaal – not only from Basel and Strasbourg, but also from the North. Geert Grote paid several extended visits to Groenendaal, seeking Ruusbroec's company because he 'considered the goodly, saintly prior no less enlightened by the Holy Spirit than St Gregory, our holy father the Pope at Rome'. We do not know whether Geert Grote was prompted to make this statement because he had recognised, while gazing at the Ruusbroec miniature discussed above, the classic portrayal of an inspired author. The archetype of such depictions was the portrait of the busily writing Gregory the Great, with the dove of the Holy Spirit perched on his shoulder, whispering divine inspiration into his ear. At any rate, the comparison between the Church Father and the prior clearly testifies to the spiritual prestige Ruusbroec had acquired.²⁰

2. Guide to *Gottesfreunde*

Strasbourg 1382. In a small cell near the monastery of the Knights of St John, to which he had retired after the death of his wife, Rulman Merswin was spending his last days studying a book that he had known for thirty years: *The Spiritual Espousals*. The former banker knew that his end was near. He had made new copies of his texts and had burned the old originals. Weakened and deathly ill, but 'compelled by God' (*von gotte betwungen*), he gathered his remaining strength and set about making

¹⁸ *Temptations* 113–16. It is possible that the newly discovered Latin letter, which Jordaens wrote on Ruusbroec's behalf, should be seen in this light. See Schepers 2001, in which it is suggested that the letter was addressed to a German.

¹⁹ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 152 (De Leu 1885, p. 296).

²⁰ De Vreese 1895, p. 261: 'den goeden heylegen prioer niet mijn verlicht en hielt vanden heyleghen geest dan hy dede sente Gregorius onsen heylegen vader den paus van Romen'.

his own adaptation of the *Espousals*. No sooner had Merswin laid down his pen than he breathed his last, on 17 July 1382, just over six months after the death of Jan van Ruusbroec, whose work had continued to touch this Strasbourg *Gottesfreund* until the hour of his death.²¹

In the rich history of the *Espousals*, Merswin's deathbed scene is one of the more dramatic episodes, but Strasbourg as the scene of action also appeals to the imagination. Until well into the fourteenth century, literature written in Middle Dutch was a rather regional phenomenon. Texts were not usually known beyond the borders of the county or duchy in which they were written, but within fifteen years the Brabantine *Espousals* had managed to reach the foothills of the Alps, probably thanks to Merswin's confessor, Johannes Tauler, the Strasbourg Dominican who had visited Ruusbroec in Groenendaal. Tauler not only ensured that the *Espousals* found its way to the *Gottesfreunde* in Basel and Strasbourg, but he presumably also helped to recast Ruusbroec's Brabantine text into Alemannish, the language of Tauler's native region in southwest Germany. In any case, someone with a theological background must have dealt with the difficult passages in the *Espousals*, in which Ruusbroec's mystical terminology was Germanised very precisely, whereas the less demanding sections were handled with far less care.²²

This almost immediate reception in distant places makes the early dissemination of Ruusbroec's debut seem more impressive than it really was. The fact that the *Espousals* reached Basel so soon in Tauler's baggage did not mean that the text was in demand all over western Europe. Ruusbroec's fame did not initially spread beyond the city walls of Brussels. Like the *Realm*, the *Espousals* circulated at first only among the author's acquaintances. Annotations in the surviving manuscripts even suggest that the dissemination of Ruusbroec's work was not undertaken in earnest until his residence in Groenendaal. In any case, his writings were certainly not an overnight success. The discovery of the *Espousals* took place slowly – and not only because the medieval manuscript culture lacked the market mechanism necessary to turn a successful debut into an instant blockbuster. The prose of the *Espousals*

²¹ Eichler 1992, pp. 280–82; Gorceix 1984, pp. 90–96 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 80.

²² Edition of the German *Espousals* in Eichler 1969. See Eichler 1992 on the German reception of the text, Reyens 1950b on the nature of the translation and Ruh 1964, p. 368, on Tauler as the transmitter of the text and on Middle Dutch mysticism in the German tradition in general. See Van Oostrom 1994, pp. 6–11, on the regional character of Middle Dutch literature.

was new to Middle Dutch readers, and its subject matter required them to have a more than average interest in the spiritual life.²³

Undoubtedly there were more Middle Dutch copies of the *Espousals* in circulation in the fourteenth century than the few that have survived, but surely the vagaries of text transmission cannot be blamed for the fact that most of the preserved manuscripts date from the late fifteenth century. By this time the appreciation of mystical literature in the vernacular had changed, and Middle Dutch spiritual prose was being copied and read on a large scale. Under the influence of the *Devotio Moderna*, far simpler spiritual ideas had replaced high-flown notions about the union with God. Geert Grote and the other leading figures of the *Devotio Moderna* preferred spiritual exercises in humility and self-examination. Mystical literature was increasingly read to find consolation for the unattainability of the divine in human existence. Typical of this trend is the way in which *exemplum*-like accounts of the convents of the *Devotio Moderna* report that Sister Gertrut van Hiesel was noted for her interest in such learned books as the *Song of Songs* and the *Espousals*. It was only on her deathbed that she gave up all pretensions of scholarly reading: 'Away with all books of learning; only in the Passion of our dear Lord do I feel peace.'²⁴

In the long history of medieval texts, new notions about literature brought about substantial changes in appreciation. In forming an idea of Ruusbroec's first readers and the earliest reception of the *Espousals*, we are not helped greatly by information on its fifteenth-century popularity in the circles frequented by Sister Gertrut, who – when death was staring her in the face – sought refuge in the standard literature of the *Devotio Moderna*. The little information we have on Rulman Merswin, who returned to the *Espousals* in the last days of his life, tells us more about the audience to whom Ruusbroec's debut was addressed.²⁵

²³ See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 120–35 and Mertens 1993c on the dissemination of Ruusbroec's works; see esp. Willeumier-Schalij 1981 (on the *Espousals*, see pp. 308–32). See Kienhorst & Kors 2001 on the theoretical possibility of a later dating of the *Espousals* in Ruusbroec's Groenendaal period. Cf. Bourgain 1989 on the stages in releasing a text to the public.

²⁴ Quotation from De Man 1919, p. 127. On Gertrut, see Koorn 1992, p. 104. On the attitude to literature in a broader context, see Mertens 1995a, p. 129 and n. 57; Willeumier-Schalij 1990.

²⁵ Cf. the study on the various phases in the reception of Dirc van Delft's *Tafel vanden kersten gelove* in Van Oostrom 1992, pp. 152–70.

According to Brother Gerard, there was no such audience. In his opinion, Ruusbroec had recorded his inspired teachings so that true believers could benefit from his writings for years to come. At the time of writing, this was more a pious wish than an actual statement of fact, and even though history has proved Brother Gerard right, it remains extremely unlikely that Ruusbroec composed his *Espousals* for the sake of posterity. In his letter to Gerson, Jan van Schoonhoven presented a completely different theory: in his view, Ruusbroec had written the *Espousals* to move his followers (*auditores*) to more fervent devotion.²⁶

This initially limited distribution of the *Espousals* sounds more plausible than Brother Gerard's suggestion of a widespread readership. In the Middle Ages, authors seldom set to work without knowing who was interested in copies of their texts. Ruusbroec was no exception to this rule, although it is not immediately apparent which audience he had in mind. The clearest indications are to be found in *On the Sparkling Stone* – a compact commentary on the *Espousals* that dates from Ruusbroec's Brussels period – in which the author addresses 'you who want to live in the spirit, for I speak to no one else' (*ghi die inden gheeste leven wilt, want nieman anders en spreke toe*).²⁷

Such a vague indication of what was nonetheless an unmistakably select company invites speculation. In the past, scholars have suggested various groups as the public for whom Ruusbroec intended the *Espousals*, with most votes going to monastics – the only ones who could actually follow Ruusbroec's teachings – and religious women, who on the whole constituted the largest readership of mystical texts in the vernacular. Neither notion, however, seems to refute the idea that Ruusbroec, when writing the *Espousals*, took into account a group of believers, difficult to place socially, about whom we can say little more than that they were united by the urge to 'live in the spirit'.

At first glance this almost impressionistic description is not a very convincing result of research into Ruusbroec's readership. One persistent problem is that literary historians have tended to parcel out their areas of research on strictly sociological grounds: romances of chivalry for the courtly aristocracy, didactic treatises for the up-and-coming middle classes, and, by common consent, religious literature exclusively for monastics and beguines. Such divisions held out the hope of assigning

²⁶ Ampe 1975a, pp. 130–31.

²⁷ *Stone* 73–75.

a well-defined category of readers to the *Espousals*. Nowadays, though, literary historians are more inclined to integrate the social antecedents of medieval texts into a broader cultural context, in which more importance is ascribed to the breaking down of cultural barriers between Latin and the vernacular as a phenomenon that could unite divergent groups of readers.²⁸

As contradictory as it may seem, this reassessment clearly shows that the indistinct profile of the Ruusbroec reader is not an insurmountable problem but rather a good indication of the great variety of people drawn to the *Espousals*: readers not divisible into categories based on social position, but united in their desire to deepen their faith by reading mystical texts in their own language. The Rhineland *Gottesfreunde* fit this description exactly. Thus the last days of Rulman Merswin bring us much closer to the earliest readers of the *Espousals* than the distance between Strasbourg and Brussels would suggest.

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It has long been known that the *Gottesfreunde* on the Upper Rhine maintained international ties, in particular with kindred spirits from the Duchy of Brabant. These contacts could come about easily, for there was lively trade between Basel and Brussels, and the pilgrims' route from Brabant to Rome ran along the Upper Rhine. More importantly, their sympathisers in Cologne kept the *Gottesfreunde* abreast of developments in the literature of the Low Countries. Johannes Tauler, the spiritual leader of the *Gottesfreunde* in Basel and Strasbourg, travelled a number of times to Cologne and the surrounding areas.

A mutual interest in religious and literary culture arose in Brabant and southwest Germany. In manuscripts stemming from Ruusbroec's circle we find texts that were also read by the *Gottesfreunde*: epistles, tracts, poems, exercises, *exempla* and sermons, which share a marked predilection for mystical life. A Dutch translation of Heinrich Seuse's *Horologium sapientiae aeternae*, a favourite text of the *Gottesfreunde*, was copied in manuscripts originating in Ruusbroec's region of Brabant before 1360. Conversely, Dutch literature was in demand in Basel and Strasbourg, most notably – apart from the *Espousals* and other of Ruusbroec's texts – excerpts from the works of Hadewijch. According

²⁸ See in general the compiled contributions and introductions in Wogan-Browne 1999. Cf. McGinn 1990–98, vol. III, pp. 19–24 and Watson 1999 on medieval mystical theology in the vernacular.

to the introduction to these German excerpts, they were taken from Hadewijch's writings, which were read by the '*Gottesfreunde* in Brabant'. As the fourteenth-century dissemination of Hadewijch's texts seems to have been very limited – though her influence could already be discerned in the *Realm* – there is little to prevent us from identifying Ruusbroec's circle as these Brabantine allies of the *Gottesfreunde* in Basel and Strasbourg.²⁹

This is plausible for other reasons as well. As a religious movement in which both the clergy and the laity took part, the *Gottesfreunde* were a sign of Ruusbroec's times. The idea of *amicitia Dei* was not new, but in the fourteenth century it suddenly gained in popularity when groups of believers began to manifest themselves as *Gottesfreunde*, seeking in this way to demonstrate a privileged relationship with God, which was the result of an intensely spiritual life. The designation 'friend of God' was meant to allude to the informal nature of their spirituality, as opposed to such metaphors as 'knight of God' or 'bride of Christ', terms describing the bonds of monastic life that were affirmed by the taking of vows. The *Gottesfreunde* sought the road to perfection in literature. In Basel and Strasbourg, as well as elsewhere in the German- and Dutch-speaking regions, reading societies sprang up which wrote, copied, read and exchanged religious texts and letters.³⁰

The new initiatives taken by the laity and the secular clergy were prompted by the religious climate in the fourteenth century. A hundred years earlier mendicant friars and beguines had caused an upheaval in religious culture. The old orders of Benedictines and Cistercians still kept their spirituality hidden behind the high walls of their abbeys,

²⁹ The contact between German and Dutch circles of pious lay people was already surprisingly well documented in Van der Kemp 1870. A summary is to be found in Mertens 1997; see Warnar 2002b on Tauler, the *Gottesfreunde*, Tauler's visit to Groenendaal and the exchange of literature; see also Warnar 1997b, pp. 101–04 and 2000a, pp. 691–95. On Tauler's travels, see Gnädinger & Mayer 1995, col. 635; on Tauler's contacts with the *Gottesfreunde* in Cologne, see further Prieur 1983, pp. 419–44. Regarding the translation of the *Horologium*, see Hoffmann 1994 supplementary to Van de Wijpersse 1926; see Deschamps 1972, p. 222, on the connection between the *Horologium* translation and Brabantine contacts with *Gottesfreunde*. On the German excerpts of Hadewijch, see Van Mierlo 1947, vol. I, p. 266; Axters 1965, pp. 210–15; Gooday 1973. Regarding the exchange between German and Dutch circles, cf. further Axters 1965, pp. 254–55; De Vreese 1900–02, p. 426; Löffler 1972; De Bruin 1935, p. 229.

³⁰ On the Rhineland *Gottesfreunde*, see Rapp 1971; Gorceix 1984; Peters 1988, pp. 142–55; Ruh 1990–99, vol. II, p. 252 and vol. III, pp. 480 and 484. Cf. Hyatte 1994, pp. 50–56, on the idea of *amicitia Dei*.

but the Dominicans and Franciscans settled in the midst of the new urban centres of politics, government and trade. Equally novel were the beguines, whose pious life of work and prayer proved that mysticism was possible in the city. Jan van Ruusbroec and Rulman Merswin, both of patrician descent, were in many respects children of this religious revolution, although both belonged to generations that had not lived through the period of change and therefore took its achievements for granted. By the time Ruusbroec arrived in Brussels, beguines and Franciscan friars had become a fixture of city life, and their message of salvation had lost its lustre. The beguines' orthodoxy was called into question after the Marguerite Porete affair and the crisis caused by the Heresy of the Free Spirit. Among the Franciscans, the sacred fire of apostolic poverty was under threat. In the proximity of power, the friars proved to be susceptible to the temptations of wealth and privilege, and the order was torn apart by a battle over the observance – strict or otherwise – of St Francis's asceticism and poverty. Their Brussels convent had acquired a princely allure when Duke Jan II and his wife were buried there. That was a status to be cherished. Ruusbroec wrote sardonically, 'When a rich man in the city is ill, they send two brothers to find out if he will perhaps choose their monastery as his last resting place.'³¹

The beguines and mendicant orders had had their day, but the longing for a higher life remained – stronger than ever, it seems – even in segments of society that were not known for their religiosity. Mystical literature was discovered by individuals among the secular clergy and educated laity, individuals who viewed the encounter with God as the crowning of an intensely religious life. Texts that held out the prospect of experiencing God were in demand among a public that included more than just the monastic specialists in contemplation. The increase in literacy and the growing religious independence of the laity stimulated the interest in spiritual literature. The reading and writing of mystical texts did not become a widespread social phenomenon overnight, but in the fourteenth century the interest taken in Ruusbroec's texts was not of the one-sided devotional character that tradition would have us believe.³²

³¹ *Tabernacle* 5:6165–66. See Gorceix 1984, pp. 50–55, on the dwindling zeal of the mendicant orders as an explanation for the rise of the *Gottesfreunde*. Cf. Schreiner 1992, McGinn 1996 and Warnar 1999a.

³² See Haas 1987, pp. 237–39; Schweitzer 1992; Dinzelbacher 1994, pp. 271–81; Warnar 2000a, pp. 691–95.

The craving for spirituality was further fuelled by the uncertainty typical of the fourteenth century, which saw not only the Great Schism in the Church but also a confusing mixture of prosperity and calamity. While natural catastrophes and epidemics claimed countless lives and forced many into beggary, some cities experienced an unprecedented rise in prosperity. The money-economy in trading centres like Brussels created both new riches and new poverty, resulting in glaring social inequality and greater interest in a pious life as a way of escaping the upheavals in the world. Radical prophets of poverty made a virtue of necessity by preaching the renouncement of property as a prerequisite to a better life. At the other end of the social scale, an embarrassment of richness could cause unbearable anxiety. The most spectacular conversions occurred among well-off citizens like Rulman Merswin, or, in Ruusbroec's immediate circle, Jan Hinckaert, in whose household the mystic lived.³³

Pomerius introduced Hinckaert as a wealthy cleric interested in the good things in life, until he yielded to the impulse to join the audience of a preacher whose message was supposedly intended for him alone. Hinckaert repented on the spot, resolved to take life seriously, and traded his comfortable circumstances for a sober existence. He renounced his chaplain's prebend, and his example was soon followed by Vranke vanden Coudenbergh, who subsequently moved in with Hinckaert and Ruusbroec. Together they lived according to the precepts of evangelical poverty – or in Pomerius's flowery language, 'like those who would follow in the footsteps of the apostles' – sharing their surplus goods with the poor. Thus the seed was planted in the Hinckaert household for the small community of priests that would later grow into the priory at Groenendaal.³⁴

The history of that priory will be taken up in subsequent chapters. At first Ruusbroec and his friends formed the core of a community of *Gottesfreunde* in Brussels: adherents of a new religious culture that no longer wished to be associated with existing orders or communities, but rather sought refuge in literature. This social diversity, combined with a common interest in mysticism, appears to form the perfect backdrop to Ruusbroec's *Espousals*. In a city like Brussels, many people – pious patriicians, banished beguines, clerics and canons at the collegiate church,

³³ Warnar 1999a, esp. pp. 384–86.

³⁴ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 125 (De Leu 1885, p. 272): 'als die ghene die wouden volghen die voetstappen der apostelen'.

mendicant friars and beghards – could find kindred spirits to share their particular brand of religious life. Moreover, no list of the religious groups in the city would be complete without the former penitence sisters – who since 1253 had belonged, as Victorines of St Catherine, to the same congregation as the later canons of Groenendaal – the anchoresses who had established themselves at the Chapel of St Lawrence in the fourteenth century, as well as the brothers and sisters of the hospitals of Brussels, such as St John's, which was adjacent to Hinckaert's residence.³⁵

We can assume that many religiously active residents of Brussels drew inspiration from the *Espousals*, not least because its use of the Middle Dutch language meant that it made no distinction between the learned and the laity. The *Espousals* is open to all those seeking to dedicate themselves to the spiritual exercises of an 'inner, exalted, yearning life' (*innighen, verhavenen, begheerlijcken leven*), which never focuses on the specific situation of a particular religious group. The sole – and, for this very reason, significant – exception is an allusion to ordained priests who are insufficiently aware of the higher meaning of their priestly office. The chaplain Ruusbroec pays a bit more heed to his equals. All things considered, one could scarcely expect it to be otherwise. During his Brussels years, Ruusbroec moved mainly in the clerical circles in and around the collegiate church, and he could expect these circles to take an interest in the *Espousals*. Learned clerics were sufficiently familiar with the Latin tradition to appreciate the stylised prose of the *Espousals* and to understand Ruusbroec's intentions when he applied exegetical techniques from the commentary tradition to his vernacular texts. The Brussels clerics were also the first to respond to the apostolic life led by Ruusbroec and his friends. The first to follow the three priests to Groenendaal were their confrères, but they also had their sympathisers among the Brussels clerics who stayed behind. Even before Coudenberg, Hinckaert and Ruusbroec left for the Zonien Forest, the Brussels priest Johannes Pape gave them two houses that he had inherited from his father, and shortly after their departure for Groenendaal they received two golden plates (*ollas ereas*) from Hendrik Slabbaert, dean of the Chapter of St Gudula.³⁶

³⁵ On female recluses, see Despy-Meyer 1970, p. 1291. On the Victorine canonesses, see Godding 1958; on the Hospital of St John, see Miramon 1999, pp. 344–50, and the list of literature.

³⁶ Dykmans 1940, p. 5 ff. (for the clerics who entered the priory), p. 60 (Slabbaert), p. 112, n. 2 (Johannes Pape).

Many more Brussels clerics would act as benefactors of Groenendaal, but its brothers also shared in the favours of the aristocracy and the patriciate. The Brussels burgher Anton de Wisselere presented them with a painting or statue (*ymaginem*) of St John the Evangelist. On the face of it, this was simply an example of conventional monastic patronage, but De Wisselere's gift points to a wider circle of people with an interest in Ruusbroec and his mystical texts. After all, since our discovery that the Strasbourg banker Merswin was an early and ardent admirer of Ruusbroec, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that a Brussels money-changer (*wisselere*) was receptive to the promise of encountering God. An interest in religious literature ran in Anton's family. In 1382 his son Lodewijk commissioned a Middle Dutch translation of the early Christian *Collationes patrum* by Cassianus. The anonymous cleric who carried out this work already had a number of translations to his name. Since 1360 he had been working, in stages, on a commission from another Brussels patrician, Jan Taye, to translate most of the books of the Bible into Middle Dutch. Typical of the Brussels milieu into which these texts found their way – and also of the sphere that Ruusbroec and his texts had created – is the allusion to God's 'dear friends' (*lieve vrienden*) made by this translator in one of his prologues.³⁷

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In Ruusbroec's day Brussels was a centre of religious literature, which united readers from various segments of society. All the evidence suggests that the anonymous translator of the previously mentioned Bible of 1360 belonged to the Carthusians of Herne (among them Brother Gerard), who played a particularly important role in the dissemination of Ruusbroec's texts. One of the first canons to enter the priory at Groenendaal, Amelricus Taye, had the same surname as Jan Taye, at whose behest the Bible translation of 1360 was made. When Amelricus was later appointed abbot of Affligem, he bore the same coat of arms as the Hinckaert family.³⁸

³⁷ Quotation in Ebbinge Wubben 1903, p. 80. See Dykmans 1940, pp. 106–07 (on Wisselere); on the Bible translator and his patrons, see Coun 1980, pp. 189–93 (on Lodewijk Thonis) and Warnar 1995a, pp. 155 and 160–61, and the literature listed.

³⁸ Regarding Brussels as the epicentre of Middle Dutch mysticism, see Warnar 1997b. For Amelricus Taye, see Dykmans 1940, pp. 7–8 and Despy-Meyer & Gérard 1964, p. 45, n. 2 (Amelricus undoubtedly belonged to the Brussels family of Taye, but his ties remain unclear).

The Rhineland *Gottesfreunde* were also a close-knit group, but Ruusbroec's Brussels circle, in which the *Espousals* originated, differed in some respects. While the elitist patricians of Basel excluded artisans from their coterie, there was a place in Ruusbroec's milieu for the less fortunate members of society. Featuring at the top of Groenendaal's list of lay brothers are bakers, textile workers, a carpenter, a mason and a shoemaker. Nearly all of them came from Brussels or its vicinity, and many of them had probably rubbed shoulders with Ruusbroec before. Nikolaas van Lombeke, the sixth lay brother, owned a house in Loxemstraat, where Ruusbroec had lived for years in the Hinckaert household.³⁹

A more subtle difference between Ruusbroec's circle and the like-minded souls in Basel and Brussels is that Ruusbroec did not look upon the Rhineland *Gottesfreunde* as potential readers but as a type of believer. Borrowing a metaphor from Bernard of Clairvaux, Ruusbroec sketched in *On the Sparkling Stone* man's relationship to his heavenly Lord as that of hireling, servant and secret friend, while the most privileged believer, having direct experience of God's presence, may consider himself His hidden son. The growth in intimacy signifies increasing mystic proximity. The hierarchical structure of the *Stone* is thus on a par with the *Espousals'* spiritual stratification into an active, a yearning and a contemplative life. The hireling serves his Lord for a reward, and the faithful servant obeys God's command out of love for Him. In any case, both are engaged in an active life. The 'secret friends of God' (*hemelijcke vriende gods*) are urged to focus on their inner life in order to explore the fullness of the spiritual life: 'God calls such friends and invites them inward and teaches them discretion in inner practice and the many hidden ways of the spiritual life.'⁴⁰

In the *Stone*, the *Gottesfreund* finds himself at the beginning of the life of yearning. This symbolic figure, therefore, strongly resembles the religious *persona* who is the focal point of Ruusbroec's mystical philosophy. The second part of the *Espousals* – which constitutes about two-thirds of the

³⁹ See Dykmans 1940, pp. 48–49, for the lay brothers. Cf. Warnar 1995b, p. 18.

⁴⁰ *Stone* 325–27 ('Alsulcke vriende roept ende noedt god inweert ende leert hem onderscheet in inwindigher oefeninghen ende menighe verborghen wise gheestelijcs levens') and 417. See Ampe 1953, p. 167 and Axters 1964, col. 870, on the borrowing from Bernard; cf. Vekeman 1984, p. 140. See *Realm* 1100 and 1106 for the somewhat cursory positioning of the *Gottesfreund* in the chapter on 'spiritual fortitude' (*gheestelijcke stercheyt*), the fourth of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, but – according to Ruusbroec – the first to play a role 'in a life of yearning' (*in eenen begheertlijcken leven*).

entire text – is devoted to the life of yearning. The doctrine of virtue of the first volume is still very general, and at the beginning of the third book of the *Espousals* Ruusbroec warns that not everyone will be able to understand the hidden truth of Holy Scripture, but in the second book he closely examines the development of spiritual life, describing step by step the exercises that transform the powers of the soul. Having cast the *Gottesfreund* in a key role in the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec accordingly adapts the forms of address which in the central book on the yearning life are both more numerous and more pointed than elsewhere. A few examples serve to illustrate this: ‘If you have these three points, then you have a foundation and a beginning of inner practice and of inner life... I am going to tell you a little similitude, so that you do not go astray, but may govern yourself well in this state... Yet I want to warn you about one thing wherein great damage can occur... Now I have shown you... Now it is seemly for us to consider... Now consider the sense (of my words) with attention; for if you understand well what I am now going to tell you and what I have just told you, then you will understand all the divine truth which any creature can teach you, and far more beyond [that].’⁴¹

Closer inspection of these phrases in their context reveals that Ruusbroec was not just concerned about his readers’ spiritual progression, but also sought to warn them about the human failings that can thwart all spiritual advancement. Ruusbroec dwells on the dangers faced by those who have savoured the delights of divine illumination, for they are the very ones who are most likely to suffer intermittently from feelings of Godforsakenness. At such times they are in danger of lapsing into a longing for material things, or – more unseemly still – a craving for titillation and a desire to seek comfort from others – an ‘inclination for outward possession of earthly things’ (*gheneychtheit uutwindigher hebbinghen eertscher dinghe*) and an ‘inordinate inclination for bodily comforts and for improper consolation from creatures’ (*ongheoordender gheneychtheit lijflijcs ghemacs ende vrems troosts van creatueren*). Ruusbroec knows seekers of God

⁴¹ *Espousals* b157–59: ‘Hebdi dese drie poente, soe hebdi een fundament ende een beghin innigher oefeninghen ende innichs levens’; *Espousals* b439–40: ‘Eene cleene ghelijckenisse willic u segghen, op dat ghi niet en doelt, maer u wel regeret in desen wesene’; *Espousals* b624: ‘Noch willic u waernen eens dinghes daer grote scade in gheschien mochte’; *Espousals* b624: ‘Nu hebbe ic u ghetoeent’; *Espousals* b1603: ‘Nu behoret ons te merkene’; *Espousals* b1670–73: ‘Nu merket met ernste desen sen; want verstadi wel dat ic u nu segghen wille ende dat ic u nu gheseghet hebbe, soe seldi verstaen alle die godlijcke waerheit die u eenighe creatuere leeren mach ende verre daer boven.’

who wrestle with their instability in spiritual life: one moment they wish to speak, the next they choose to keep silent; one day they want to give away all their possessions for the sake of God, the next they want to keep everything; sometimes they want to receive the Eucharist, then again they attach no importance to it; today they want to roam the country, tomorrow they consider withdrawing to a hermitage.⁴²

More than elsewhere in the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec is referring here to real-life experience, showing remarkably little interest in the regulated forms of spiritual life in convents and beguinages. This goes to show that his audience really was as varied as one would expect of an urban spiritual elite: clergy and laity, rich and poor, hermits and church-goers – in short, friends of god, whose inconstancy in things spiritual had to be overcome without the disciplined automatism of monastic rules. In that context there is still one thing worthy of note: it is precisely Ruusbroec's warnings of instability in the *Espousals* that forms the main part of a sermon attributed to Johannes Tauler, appearing in a collection that originated within the circle of the *Gottesfreunde*. Evidently it was considered entirely appropriate to alert this group to the perils of inconstancy in spiritual life. More serious still was the danger of losing sight of sound doctrine or even lapsing into heresy. This was another piece of wisdom Tauler had borrowed from the *Espousals*. In the same sermon, he quoted almost in their entirety Ruusbroec's frank pronouncements about the errors of false mystics, for that, too, was a matter close to the heart of this guide to *Gottesfreunde*.⁴³

3. Heretics and Clerics

Having only just started on *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec interrupted his deliberations to insert a chapter on 'six kinds of people who do not receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit'. Thus reads the heading, appearing in a number of manuscripts, which prefaces a parade of sinners, infidels, apostates, hypocrites and proud folk from whom God's grace is withheld.

⁴² *Espousals* b799–800 and b836–46, including quotation (b817–18).

⁴³ The sermon in question is treated by Colledge 1961 (based on the early printed editions of Tauler). On the collection (preserved in a manuscript), see Strauch 1909, with a discussion of the connection with the *Gottesfreunde*, which also emerges from the introduction to the sermons, in which Tauler is identified as the preacher in the *Meisterbuch* (Borchling 1902, pp. 211–12). See Gnädinger 1993, pp. 39–43, on Tauler and the *Gottesfreunde*.

Some simply live at variance with Christian teachings, while others seek to strike a bargain by attempting to serve God without curbing their earthly desires. Yet others, who cannot conquer their selfishness, serve God to promote their own interests. The most suspect are the proud and haughty who think they possess all wisdom and incorrectly regard their natural ‘clarity of understanding’ (*clærheyt haers verstants*) as true knowledge of God.⁴⁴

Ruusbroec’s scathing description, appearing as an interlude early on in his first text, of those unsuited to the pursuit of spiritual perfection was merely advance warning of a thorny issue that would recur in all his writings. Moreover, he gradually became more militant. It was mainly the preachers of false mystical doctrine who bore the brunt of his displeasure: diabolical people who maintained that they themselves were Christ or God and therefore above the sacraments of the Church. ‘This must be the most foolish and the most pernicious opinion since the world began’, was Ruusbroec’s commentary in *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*. That was easy enough to say, for he was only opposing ideas expressed in those exact words in the accusations made against Meister Eckhart at his heresy trial.⁴⁵

Such selective indignation was no exception. Indeed, closer examination of Ruusbroec’s offensives reveals a rather methodical approach: he tended to wage war against officially stigmatised fallacies. This raises the question of whether the mystic was really the heresy hunter he is frequently made out to be, for surely the most notable effect of Ruusbroec’s polemics was to make his own ideas seem all the more orthodox by comparison, thereby pre-empting possible criticism. A good example of his strategy is the conclusion of the second book of the *Espousals*, which Tauler quoted extensively in his sermon addressed to the *Gottesfreunde*. Ruusbroec describes in detail three errors, or ‘contrarienesses’ (*contrarien*), as a follow-up to an impression of the bliss one feels

⁴⁴ *Realm* 332–551; the quotation is taken from the tables of contents in the manuscripts of Ruusbroec’s collected works (see *Realm*, Appendixes, p. 484: ‘ses manieren van lieden die de gaven des heiligen geeste niet en ontfaen’).

⁴⁵ Van Mierlo 1932, pp. 307–10 and Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 303–04, in which it is argued that the central section of the *Realm* – on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit – is addressed to the Free Spirits who thought they could do without God’s grace. Quotation *Mirror* 1534–35: ‘want dit es wel de sotste ende de quaedste opinie die noeyt ghehooert was van beghinne der werelt’. See the note by this passage for the source. On Ruusbroec and (alleged) heresies, see, among others, Van Mierlo 1932; Lerner 1972, pp. 190–95; Schweitzer 1982 and 1984; Feys 1991; Verdeyen 1992; Burger 1993, pp. 35–38; Warnar 1993c, pp. 24–26; Mommaers 1995, pp. 37–38.

when one is struck to the depths of one's soul by 'the incommensurable inshining of God' (*dat onghemetene inlichten gods*). This is the fruit of the inner, yearning life, which one can pursue in its highest form in three ways: first, by closing oneself off from the outside world in inner peace; second, by doing good works and yearning for God; third, by maintaining a dynamic balance of the first two ways, 'and this is the summit of the inner life' (*Ende dit es dat hoochste van innighen levene*). This point would seem to mark the end of the second book of the *Espousals*, but the conclusion is followed by an appendix of more than three hundred lines, in which Ruusbroec explains 'How some people live contrary to these three modes'.⁴⁶

Ruusbroec explains succinctly that some people wrongly regard the natural peace of their spiritual 'emptiness' (*ledicheit*) as the state in which one finds God; this, however, is actually nothing more than the natural, inner peace that anyone can achieve through meditation. Others lack true yearning for God, and let themselves be led by a natural love basically directed at their own lives. They are all deceived, for they do not realise that higher truth cannot be obtained without the grace of God. This was a serious matter, but could be glossed over to some extent by attributing it to an unfortunate misunderstanding. The third error is the sheer malice of the haughty, who banish all images from their spirit and then mistake the subsequent feeling of emptiness for the highest form of mystical union. Ruusbroec has nothing good to say about these heretics, whose 'unrighteous life' was 'full of spiritual error and of all perversity'.⁴⁷ They regard any disturbance to their spiritual emptiness as an infringement upon God's actions, which they seek to endure in absolute indifference. In their presumed spiritual freedom they no longer consider themselves subject to the commandments and practices of the Church. This is a fatal misconception. They presume to contemplate God and consider themselves the holiest people on earth. 'Nevertheless they live contrary and unlike to God, and to all the saints, and to all good people'.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Espousals* variants to b2294: 'Hoe selke menschen leven contrarie desen III wisen'. See b2158–2293 for the concluding words on the 'inner life' (*innighen leven*) and b2294–2584 for the description of the three errors.

⁴⁷ *Espousals* b2415–16: 'ongherecht leven vol gheestelijcker dolinghen ende alre verkeertheit'.

⁴⁸ *Espousals* b2419–20: 'Nochtans levense contrarie ende onghelijc gode ende allen heilighen ende allen goeden menschen'.

As interesting as these views are, even as far as general theories on contemplation and mysticism are concerned, Ruusbroec's discussion actually revolves around the 'contrariness' of erring souls. Within the space of three hundred lines, Ruusbroec heightens the contrast between such reprehensible people and true believers by using the term *contrarie* no fewer than sixteen times. Its Middle Dutch meanings – used variously as a noun, adjective and adverb – have the strong judicial connotations of a dispute. Ruusbroec emphatically contrasts the errors he describes with his own ideas. In the unlikely event that readers doubted the tenets of the *Espousals*, this was intended to convince them of its orthodoxy. Ruusbroec took a high tone in denouncing spiritual errors, but the picture he paints is borne out by such documents as the sentence passed against Marguerite Porete, as well as the *Clementines* – the papal decrees of 1311 which initiated the hunt for Free Spirit heretics. One does not necessarily have to read between the lines of the *Espousals* to start wondering if Ruusbroec actually knew anyone who held such highly objectionable ideas: 'I hope that we will not find many of these people, but those who are such are the most evil and the most pernicious people alive.' Freely interpreted, this means that Ruusbroec was against heretics who may have existed only in the minds of the ecclesiastical authorities. This may sound far-fetched, but anyone with a clear idea of the events unfolding at the time the *Espousals* was written will understand why Ruusbroec was so eager to avoid any association with heretical views.⁴⁹

Ruusbroec took no unnecessary measures in distancing himself from such dubious theories. In the fourteenth century, many radical variants of mystical theology were taken to be symptoms of insidiously spreading heresies. That diagnosis, however, was not always correct. Here and there people overstepped the boundaries of orthodoxy, but reports of an epidemic of Free Spirit heresy were greatly exaggerated. Taking place in the background were conflicts between the mendicant orders, the Inquisition and Church rulers, who made each other's lives miserable with mutual recriminations of heresy. Nowadays historians are increasingly inclined to think that Meister Eckhart's famous trial for

⁴⁹ *Espousals* b2469–71 (quotation b2469–71): 'Ic hope men dierre menschen niet vele en vendet; maer diet sijn, dat sijn die quaetste ende die scadelijcste die leven'. For 'contrariness' (*contrarie*), see MNW III, cols. 1825–26. See Verdeyen 1992 on the allusions to Marguerite Porete and Mommaers 1995 for the underlying conceptions of mystical contemplation.

heresy settled at least as many matters of church politics as questions of doctrinal import.⁵⁰

The authorities made it seem as though heresy was rampant, but in reality the atmosphere was probably more poisoned by conflicts of interest, internal power struggles and intrigues. Simple chaplains like Ruusbroec played no role whatsoever in these ecclesiastical disputes, but such modest figures could easily fall prey to dignitaries seeking to strengthen their position in the Church. In 1326 Heinrich of Virneburg, archbishop of Cologne, had the priest Walter of Holland sentenced to death on the grounds that he had allegedly distributed booklets (*libelli*) containing heretical tracts. In the same year Archbishop Heinrich ordered an investigation into the activities of Meister Eckhart, whose preaching to the laity in the vernacular had supposedly given rise to all kinds of wild ideas about mystical rest and poverty of spirit.⁵¹

In Brussels, Ruusbroec was at a safe remove from the ambitious Archbishop Heinrich, but his vernacular texts written for an informal circle of *Gottesfreunde* could easily have discredited him. He still needed to prove that his ideas had nothing to do with Free Spirit heresy or errors of any kind. All in all, the mystic seems to have dreamed up more apostates than the facts justified. He describes hypocrites who mask their pride with a pretence of asceticism, stubbornly clinging to their novelties and arrogantly ignoring other views. Those were the standard heretics of the times, and they were imputed with the biblical characteristics of false prophets – traits that had been attributed to them since the days of the Church Fathers.⁵²

It must be said, however, that Ruusbroec did a convincing job of varying on traditional themes. In *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, he interpreted the characteristics of twenty species of birds in terms of heretical phenomena. It is easy to imagine the raven symbolising diabolical disbelief; more ingenious, though, is the significance Ruusbroec ascribes to the owl, which is hindered in its flight by its heavy plumage. The owl symbolises the spirit that is unable to rise above its nature, because it does not enjoy God's grace. And just as the owl tends to linger at night

⁵⁰ See Lambert 1994, pp. 181–88 and Wehrli-Jones 2000, esp. pp. 223–30, and the literature listed there. On the trial against Meister Eckhart, see also Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, pp. 243–57; Trusen 1988; Davies 1990 (on conflicts of interest).

⁵¹ Warnar 1995b, pp. 10–12.

⁵² Bredero 2000, pp. 245–52.

among the dead in the cemetery, straying souls shrink from the light and seek their peers 'in the sects' (*in der secten*).⁵³

Ruusbroec no doubt captivated his audience with his moralistic bird book, but his condemnation of heretics is nowhere so fierce as in *On the Twelve Beguines*. A separate part of this work is devoted to a four-pronged attack on forms of heresy that are conveniently classified as being directed against God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and – even more seriously – a combination of all three. This image of the enemy sets the tone: 'Now mark these false prophets, lest you be deceived' (*Nu merct dese valsche propheten opdat ghi niet bedroghen en wert*). More so than in his other treatises, Ruusbroec seeks here to give the impression that he is on the war path, unmasking the lunacy of Free Spirit heresy as pure pantheism. Some people claim to be God's essence above the divine persons, and think themselves superior to the Holy Spirit; others say that their souls are made of the substance of God, and when they die, they will be the same as before.

They say still more: that he who traversed all of heaven would find no distinction in angels, neither in souls, nor orders, nor glory, nor reward, for they imagine that there is nothing but a simple blessed essence, without activity. And they say still more: that we all – the evil and the good, and God Himself – shall all, after the last day, be God's essence, empty and without activity in eternity. This is why they do not want to know or acknowledge or will or love or thank or praise or desire or have, for they want to be above God and without God, neither seeking nor finding God anywhere, and to be rid of all virtues. This, you see, is what they call perfect poverty of spirit.⁵⁴

The viewpoints that Ruusbroec describes *ad absurdum* have been identified as quotations from Meister Eckhart's controversial sermons on poverty of spirit. These utterances were also cited in the papal bull

⁵³ *Tabernacle* 5:6399–6418 (raven) and 6465–95 (owl). See Schweitzer 1984 concerning this passage in connection with heretics. See Bastings 1991 on *Der naturen bloeme* as one of Ruusbroec's sources.

⁵⁴ *Beguines* 2a/45–64. Quotations 45 and 54–64: 'Si segghen noch meer: die alden hemel dore ghinghe, hi en vonde niet ondersceet van inghelen, noch van zielen noch van ordenen, noch van glorien noch van loone, want hen dunct dat daer anders niet en es dan een sempel salich wesen sonder werc. Ende si segghen noch meer: dat wij alle – quade ende goede ende god selve – na den lesten dach, soe selen wij alle gods wesen zyn ledich ende zonder werc inder ewicheit. Ende hier omme en willen si noch weten noch kinnen, noch willen noch minnen, noch danken noch loven, noch begheren noch hebben, want si willen zijn boven gode ende sonder gode ende gode niegherincs soeken noch vinden, ende van alle duechden quite. Siet, dit heten si volmaecte armoede van gheeste.'

explaining Eckhart's condemnation. These were the sources on which Ruusbroec based his unfavourable picture, following a strategy already proven effective. By twisting and exaggerating the facts, he ridiculed existing notions, which made it even easier to dismiss their adherents as 'foolish blind people' (*sotte blende menschen*) guilty of 'outrageous disbelief' (*scandelijc ongeloeve*). The mystic does not shrink from strong language when he confronts the 'worthless knave' (*onwerdich boeve*) with the 'out-and-out lie' (*grove loghene*) of his error, but Ruusbroec's increasing agitation is carefully orchestrated up to and including the passages in which he pretends to address the heretics – who disdain the sacrament of the Eucharist – and reads to them from the liturgical book about the consecration of the host: 'Now mark then, stupid ass, I shall read you the real truth' (*Nu merct dan onverstendich esel, ic sal u die rechte waerheit lesen*).⁵⁵

In the *Beguines* we can distinguish two elements that help to place Ruusbroec's condemnation of heretics in a historical context. First, his ideas about heretics were based primarily on the stereotypes in literature and the images propagated by ecclesiastical ordinances. Second, his attacks were entirely in keeping with rhetorical convention. In particular, Ruusbroec's philippic in the *Beguines* was a well-written genre piece which, once it was recognised as such, might also appeal to a broader readership. The letters in which Bernard of Clairvaux accused his arch-enemy Abélard of heresy were later studied as virtuoso demonstrations of rhetorical fireworks. Ruusbroec, too, had read the twelfth-century text carefully. In the *Beguines* he quotes the letter in which Bernard attacked Abélard: 'And St Bernard says: He [God] is not a part, but He is all' (*Ende sinte Bernaert spreect: Hy en es gheen deel maer hi es al*). It is a short but revealing quotation; Ruusbroec had prepared his case well. Even if his arrows were aimed at the true heresy of the Free Spirit, the rhetorical construction of his invectives was intended to do more than simply to warn of the dangers of apostasy.⁵⁶

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Ruusbroec's belief that heretics should be burned at the stake may sound callous, yet his condemnation of dissenters had nothing to do with intolerance. Ideas of tolerance and freedom of religion were alien

⁵⁵ *Beguines* 2a/243–44.

⁵⁶ *Beguines* 2a/306. Cf. Clanchy 1999, p. 306.

to the Middle Ages. The Christian faith had but one Church with one official creed, and Ruusbroec was well enough informed to know which dangers to avoid. In haranguing against heretics, he sought above all to avoid being tarred with the same brush. Ruusbroec knew that there were strict limits to religious dogma, and he was anxious to keep his readers from including him among the followers of Free Spirit heresy on the basis of his assertions about 'the summit of the inner life'. In papal decrees such as the *Clementines*, Free Spirit heretics were accused of harbouring ideas about a union with God that took place in an emptiness beyond the practice of virtue. But Ruusbroec, too, had written that natural peace 'empties a person of all things, and raises him above activity and above all virtues'. Out of context, that proposition could easily be taken the wrong way. Just how perilous such statements were is shown by the stories of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, who were both convicted on evidence supplied by statements quoted out of context.⁵⁷

In his mystical writings Ruusbroec was treading on theological terrain, where a wide variety of issues dealing with the contemplation of God were being discussed. It was mostly specialists in scholastic dispute who entered into the Latin debate, but writings also appeared in the vernacular discussing such matters as the natural predisposition of the intellect and the role of grace in experiencing God in earthly life. This brought lay people into contact with complicated issues, causing them to form unreasonably great expectations of a life of mystical perfection. The authors of the *Clementines*, in any case, thought they perceived disquieting links between scholarly theory and lay practice.⁵⁸

We cannot consider these fears of Free Spirit heresy completely ungrounded, any more than we can dismiss Ruusbroec's outbursts against heretics as pre-emptive strikes. Indeed, his words were prompted by current events. Jan van Leeuwen, one of Ruusbroec's disciples, was quite candid about the corrupt religious practices of beguines, beghards and other folk who thought they had found salvation in poverty of spirit. Jan van Schoonhoven also believed that the *Espousals* had been

⁵⁷ See *Mirror* 1589 for Ruusbroec's statement that heretics should be burned at the stake. Quotation *Espousals* b2201-03: 'ledicht den mensce van allen dinghen ende si verheftene boven werken ende boven alle doechde'.

⁵⁸ See Trottmann 1995, esp. pp. 6-7 and 283-410. For the intellectual context of Ruusbroec's mysticism, see Warnar 2002b; cf. Largier 1995, Sturlese 1995 (esp. cols. 1001-02); for its propagation in beghard circles, see Sturlese 1980, col. 135.

written as a retort to Free Spirit followers, with which Brabant was said to be teeming in those days. Brother Gerard attributed the success of Ruusbroec's texts to the great need for sound doctrine in the vernacular, owing to 'some hypocrisies and contrarinesses' (*enighe ypocrisien ende contrarieren*) which had arisen at the time and which Ruusbroec describes in numerous places in his writings, in particular 'at the end of the second part of the book on the enrichment of the spiritual espousals' (*in dat einde vanden anderen dele des boecs vander chierheit der gheesteliker brulocht*). At about the same time as Brother Gerard, Willem Jordaens wrote about people who reject Holy Scripture because they have converted to 'new lunacies' (*nyewer rasernyen*), spread by word of mouth and circulating in writings and songs. Jordaens was possibly referring to the flagellants who were trekking through Brabant in 1350. This ostentatious form of penance, which followed on the heels of the great plague epidemic of 1348, deteriorated into a religious uprising, whose instigators were described in contemporary chronicles as having been carried away by the teachings of the Free Spirit.⁵⁹

The clearest indications of mystical errors in Ruusbroec's circle date from after his death. In 1410 the Carmelite William of Hildernissen was accused of leading the *Homines intelligentes*, a heretical sect in Brussels, which, according to tradition, had sprung up much earlier around the legendary lay preacher Aegidius Cantor, a self-appointed saviour of mankind who proclaimed an unlimited doctrine of salvation. It was said that, as a sign of his perfection, he indulged in nudity, and rumour had it that he invited his followers to perform all natural acts – including sexual intercourse (even outside marriage) – in complete freedom. Thanks to their unbridled libertinism, the *Homines intelligentes* have been assured a place in every publication on medieval heresy. Many historians were eager to believe the incredible stories. Only Robert Lerner, historiographer of the Free Spirit, studied their case with a cool eye. After his critical examination of the evidence, little remained of the legendary adventures of Aegidius Cantor. The most revealing conclusion was that the great number of accusations were intended to cover up the lack of evidence in the case against William of Hildernissen. The principal accusation involved preaching a radical

⁵⁹ On Schoonhoven, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 130–31; for the Brother Gerard quotation, see De Vreese 1895, p. 11 and for Willem Jordaens, see Reyens 1967, pp. 63/73–80. On the flagellants, see Jan van Boendale in the *Brabantsche Yeeften*, book V, verses 4955–5066 (Willems & Bormans 1839–69, vol. I).

mystical doctrine that closely resembled the ideas espoused by Eckhart's admirers. Texts expounding those ideas were already circulating in Brussels in Ruusbroec's day.⁶⁰

The outcome of the affair indicates that the alleged Brussels heresy was not as outrageous as the sources would have us believe. William was banished from the diocese for a time, although ten years later he resurfaced as a *lector* at the Carmelite convent in Tienen, but not before he had publicly distanced himself from any outlandish notions about the perfection of the inner person. William was instructed to renounce his teachings publicly before the Church of St Gudula and in the beguinage known as the Wijngaard, that is to say, in the presence of clerics and beguines – the two groups traditionally most open to suspicions of Free Spirit heresy.

Representatives of both circles play the principal roles in a farce, the text of which has been partly preserved in a Brussels manuscript dating from the time of William's conviction. The hypocritical hermit Brother Everaet manages to seduce Sister Lutgaert into a life of *truwanten*: beggary and sloth under the guise of a religious life. Sister Lutgaert seeks contact with beguines, beghards and *swesters* ('grey sisters'): semi-religious groups considered to be susceptible to heretical teachings and therefore to indolence and parasitism. The play contains allusions to biblical passages, quoted to attack adherents of Free Spirit thought. The moral of the story is a warning against professing false piety. The most notorious case of wandering beghards was reported by Jan van Boendale and Lodewijk van Velthem in their Brabantian chronicles. Several vagabonds – specifically referred to as beghards in some sources – posed as nobles of Brabant thought to have been killed in the Battle of Guldensporen in 1302. Though long presumed dead, they unexpectedly returned home, where they were given a joyous reception – and were warmly welcomed into the marriage bed – before the shameful truth came out. Jan van Boendale labelled their deception *truwancie*.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Lerner 1972, pp. 157–63. For a later view, see Lambert 1994, pp. 181–88. On Eckhart's texts in Brussels manuscripts, see Warnar 1997a, p. 106.

⁶¹ Edition of the text in *Truwanten* 1987; on the text's background, see pp. 90–111. Brinkman 2000 is the most recent publication on the provenance of the manuscript. On *Truwanten* in connection with the heresy of the Free Spirit, see esp. Lerner 1967–68. For a general survey of the associations of beghards, beguines and *swesters* with heresies, see Van Mierlo 1930 and Wormgoor 1985. On beghards posing as nobles, see Lerner 1972, pp. 40–41; Henne & Wauters 1845, vol. I, p. 86; Jan van Boendale in the *Brabantsche Yeesten*, book V, verses 519–60 (Willems & Bormans 1839–69, vol. I).

Sister Lutgaert was surrounded by 'truants', but in the end they were a less serious threat to religious morality than the type of renegade cleric embodied by Brother Everaet. His oldest Middle Dutch namesake is the protagonist of *Frenesie* (Madness), an extremely cynical monologue in rhyme, which begins by comparing the art of poetry to farting and goes on to recount a dream about a calf that celebrates Mass and then becomes a cardinal in Rome – with the Pope's approval, of course, because this particular beast is his sister's child. The first-person narrator is a down-at-heel student who has obtained the academic degree of *magister* in Paris. Subsequently failing to secure a prebend, he is branded an *Everardijn* and reduced to beggary.⁶²

The destitute *magister* in *Frenesie* called himself an *Everardijn* – a still mysterious nickname for the itinerant clerics who had been roaming about since the twelfth century. Various epithets – goliards, *gyrovagi*, *vagi clerici*, *Eberhardini* and Aernout Brothers – are all generic names for a motley crew of wastrels and wandering intellectuals living on the fringes of society: poor students, abandoned lovers, penniless artists, lovesick poets, apostate monks and begging clerics. The *Eberhardini* and their cohorts owe their fame in literary history to their daring vagabond verse, of which *Frenesie* is one of the finest examples written in Middle Dutch. Scholarly ne'er-do-wells also appeared in Church ordinances: at the end of the thirteenth century, measures were taken against goliards, peripatetic preachers and other suspect persons who disturbed the celebration of Mass by singing their own songs, and undermined the authority of the clergy by spreading deviant ideas about religion. The *Eberhardini* were said to hold clandestine meetings in which they foisted their subversive ideas upon the unsuspecting congregation.⁶³

According to the Franciscan preacher Berthold of Regensburg, these pseudo-clerics were to blame for the fact that the word 'student' had become synonymous with 'heretic'. This was putting it very strongly indeed, but it could not be denied that orthodoxy had the most to fear from unaffiliated clerics and students, who were the true troublemakers. Beghards and beguines were portrayed as the principal propagators of dubious notions about religion and mysticism, but it is not likely that

⁶² *Frenesie* is published in Verwijs 1860, pp. 37–40.

⁶³ Grundmann 1961, pp. 391–94. On the Aernout Brothers and related groups in Middle Dutch literature, see Muller 1920; Enklaar 1956, pp. 89–135; Peeters 1958; *Truuanten* 1987, p. 93.

these people – simple folk for the most part – were the source of such sophisticated ideas about a spiritual union with God. The instigators of such complex notions were students, clerics and would-be scholars. Only people like the Carmelite William of Hildernissen were capable of introducing ideas from the discipline of theology into the minds of lay people, over-exciting them with promises of mystical perfection in this life. Without trained clerics, learned theories about freedom of spirit could never have spread beyond the walls of the universities and convents. The trial against Meister Eckhart had in fact started with the accusation that he had formulated his radical views on mystical theology in the vernacular and presented them to a lay public who came down from the lofty heights of his Dominican erudition with nothing but delusions.⁶⁴

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Ruusbroec was well aware of what could happen to the authors of mystical texts in the vernacular and must have realised that the *Espousals*' dangerous combination of theology and Middle Dutch was being subjected to close scrutiny. Jacob van Maerlant had suffered for less: his *Rijmbijbel* (*Rhyming Bible*) – an adaptation in Dutch verse of Peter Comestor's *Historia scolastica* – elicited fierce criticism from the clergy, who felt that no good could come of letting the laity acquire knowledge of Holy Scripture on their own in the vernacular. In the prologue to his *Spiegel historiael* (*Mirror of History*), Maerlant referred to the fact that he had been reprimanded twice by the 'clergy' (*paepschap*): 'Because I revealed to lay people the mysteries of the Bible' (*Want ic leeken weten dede Uter Byblen die heimelichede*). Presumably his strophic poem *Vander drievoudichede* (*On the Trinity*) – written at the same time or after the *Rijmbijbel* – had not been favourably received either. In writing his stanzas on the divine persons, Maerlant had indeed ventured into difficult territory, but compared with the *Espousals*, his verses are harmless. The problem with *Vander drievoudichede* was not so much the subject of the poem as the lay status of the poet.⁶⁵

Ruusbroec was more privileged than Maerlant because he had been ordained as a priest. This gave him more elbow room than Maerlant,

⁶⁴ See in general Grundmann 1961, pp. 373–94. On Eckhart, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, p. 245.

⁶⁵ See De Bruin 1977 and 1979, pp. 190–209, despite the different perspective offered in Van Moolenbroek 1991 and Van Oostrom 1996a, pp. 287–89.

but the mystic went so much further in unravelling the divine mysteries that he had to watch his step every bit as carefully. Ruusbroec was forewarned and forearmed early on in his career. In 1353 at the latest, Jan van Leeuwen completed *Vanden IX choren der inghelen* (*On the Nine Choirs of Angels*), in which Ruusbroec's faithful disciple informs the reader that some people had taken offence – wrongly, of course – at his teacher's remarks about the relationship between the individual elements of the Trinity and their combined existence in the Godhead.⁶⁶

It is not easy to determine what Ruusbroec is being reproached for: a general point in his teachings or one passage in particular? And exactly which text is Van Leeuwen referring to? The chief obstacle seems to be Ruusbroec's idea that the three divine persons experience mutual union on a higher level as a common essence in the Godhead than as individual persons in the Trinity. Such intra-trinitarian theories had already appeared in *The Realm of Lovers*. If the objections were actually aimed at this text, this sheds new light on the author's refusal to have this treatise circulated. At any rate, Van Leeuwen's remark proves that Ruusbroec's writings could be considered controversial, despite his precautionary measures. The relationship of the Godhead to the three divine persons was the subject of heated debate. An exact definition of Ruusbroec's theological position is a matter for specialists; the experts in his own day apparently decided that the mystic had taken up a difficult position. Some saw the abstract notion of the Godhead as an unacceptable fourth element impinging on the Trinity.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Axters 1975, pp. 2–3: 'Hi [Ruusbroec] heeft selkerhande dinc ghesproken daer hem die liede licht tonrechte aen ghestoten hebben, daer hi segghen wilt ende set dat die persone gods in der godheit iets wat meer ontfaende syn oft ontfaen moghen in ghebrukeliker enicheit overmits den bloeten wederslach harer drier enicheit danse met onderscheede in persoeliken eyghenscape hebben soudē.' On the text by Van Leeuwen, see also Van Eeghem 1956, pp. 89–94 (with dating).

⁶⁷ On the theological issue in question, see in general Robb 1995 and 1997. In his discussion in the *Realm* of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, Ruusbroec splits the gift of counsel into two degrees; when receiving the first variant, the soul experiences union with the divine persons, but 'not so that this would be the unity of divine natures' (*niet alsoe dat dat si die enicheit godlijker natueren*) (*Realm* 1501–02). The higher degree of the gift of counsel corresponds to a higher experience of God: 'and the divine persons have flowed inward into unity and hang naturally and enjoyably in that same essence' (*ende de godlike persoene die sijn in ghevloeten in enicheit ende hanghen natuerlike ende ghebrukelijc in dat selve wesen*) (*Realm* 1902–04). See *Realm* up to and including 2001, where the argument leads to the problematic passage on 'one without distinction' (*een sonder differencie*), for which the Carthusians of Herne asked Ruusbroec for clarification.

The academic discussion took place in Paris, but news of it had reached Brussels, so it is in Ruusbroec's own circle that we must seek his rebukers. One of the local specialists was the former lector of the Brussels Carmelites, Matthias of Cologne, who had become involved in theological debates during his stay at the University of Paris. In 1345 he was appointed suffragan of Brussels, and in this capacity he consecrated the new chapel of Groenendaal that same year. If he had not previously read Ruusbroec's writings as a matter of personal interest, at this point he would have been required, by virtue of his function, to take a good look at spiritual life in the new institution.⁶⁸

The suffragan of Brussels did not wield a great deal of authority, however. As chaplain – first in Brussels and later in Groenendaal – Ruusbroec fell under the jurisdiction of the Chapter of St Gudula, which as the highest canonical authority for all of Brussels had considerable power with regard to blasphemy, usury, fornication and heresy. There is no evidence that Ruusbroec was forced to give an account of his conduct to the Church authorities, although we could in fact interpret the anti-heretical passage in the second book of the *Espousals* as compliance with a request for more detailed information. The Brussels chapter of canons, which met once a week, had no doubt formed an opinion about their chaplain's writings early on. They were, after all, responsible for overseeing the orthodoxy of the chapter's clerics. Regardless of whether they were favourably disposed towards Ruusbroec, they must have wanted to prevent him from taking overly daring standpoints, for feelings could run high in this theological dispute. Matters were especially sensitive because the discussion did not take place within the usual framework of a scholarly debate. Anyone who claimed faithfulness to Church doctrine was in effect calling his opponent an apostate. This also happened in the exchange of philosophical ideas, in which the exponents of contrary views of the mysteries of the Trinity were conveniently placed in the same camp as the goliards and *Eberhardini*, whose alleged intra-trinitarian theories were in fact not much different from Ruusbroec's own views on the subject.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ On Matthias of Cologne, see Lickteig 1981, pp. 174–75 and Berlière 1905, pp. 35–48.

⁶⁹ See Bérubé 1991, esp. 130–31, for the reference to Duns Scotus and Ruusbroec's standpoint. Bérubé's observations are based on Verdeyen 1978, pp. 164–65, concerning two passages from the *Mirror* and the *Beguines*, but Ruusbroec's views in the *Realm* do not differ from this. See Lefèvre 1942, pp. 160–82 and De Ridder 1987–88, vol. I, pp. 31–37, on the judicial authority of the chapter.

The business with Gerson has already shown us how differently things might have turned out for Ruusbroec and his reputation. In the Middle Ages a great many preachers of misunderstood ideas fell victim to the axiom that there was only one religious truth. Ruusbroec was undoubtedly aware of the fine line between recognition as an *auctor* and condemnation as a heretic. Just how easily clerics could fall from grace is evidenced by the tragic story of the Friars of the Sack, who had founded a convent in Brussels in the thirteenth century. In their short existence the Friars of the Sack acquired a reputation as well-trained preachers propagating the classic message of religious poverty and impassioned spirituality. The appeal of their apostolic idealism was strengthened by their aversion to the religious establishment, but this ultimately led to their downfall. At the Council of Lyon in 1274 their order was banned – presumably for no other reason than the lack of an advocate to promote their interests at this fateful meeting.⁷⁰

By around 1300 the last of the Friars of the Sack had disappeared from Brussels, but their reputation lived on. As late as 1410 the inventory drawn up by the clerics of Groenendaal referred to their Brussels *refugium* as 'our large hostelry near the Friars of the Sack'. In Ruusbroec's day, the former convent of the banned order offered accommodation to the confraternity of students who had studied in Paris, the *clerici parisienses*. They met in a chapel dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, to whom the Friars of the Sack were particularly devoted. It is not clear whether it was the *clerici parisienses* who kept the memory of the former order alive or whether the Friars of the Sack were especially well-remembered by those at Groenendaal. Together the Brussels brothers and students give us some idea of the clerics and religious idealists in Ruusbroec's immediate circle. Since both groups were under the patronage and protection of the patriciate, they were largely unaffected by the powerful Chapter of St Gudula. Later on we will see that Ruusbroec, Hinckaert and Coudenberg were in a similar position during the Brussels prelude to the founding of Groenendaal. The mystic kept well away from the danger zone where he could have been taken for a new *Everardijn*, but he was continually on his guard nonetheless. When Ruusbroec took

⁷⁰ Lawrence 1994, p. 93. On the Friars of the Sack, see Emery 1943 and Elm 1973, also with regard to the Brussels convent. For the Brussels Friars in particular, see Lefèvre 1939 and 1942, pp. 102–03.

up the pen, he risked ending up like Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete; from the moment the *Espousals* was put into circulation, the author could be called to account. No wonder, then, that upon finishing the *Espousals* Ruusbroec immediately began a commentary treating its most delicate points.⁷¹

4. Conversation with a Hermit

On the Sparkling Stone, the title customarily given to Ruusbroec's third treatise, refers to a passage from the Book of Revelation about a stone that is called *calculus* in the Vulgate. Those who transcend themselves and all things will receive a 'small sparkling stone' (*blinckende steenken*). This stone contains a new name, which has been in existence since before the world began and 'which no one knows except he who receives it' (*die niemen versteet dan diene ontfeet*). This mystical connotation of the *calculus* was fairly conventional in medieval literature. Ruusbroec's personal contribution is his substitution of an equivalent word. In the old Middle Dutch version of the Apocalypse, no suitable word could be found, and so *calculus* was left untranslated. Ruusbroec quoted the Middle Dutch version, but on his own authority changed *calculus* to *terdelinc* ('pebble'): a stone so small that even if one tread (*tert*) upon it, it could scarcely be felt.⁷²

From kingdom to marriage feast to pebble: the tiny *terdelinc* was quite a change from the cosmic symbolism of the *Realm* and the stylistic beauty of the *Espousals*. Indeed, the text resembles the title: in the *Stone* Ruusbroec treated, briefly and succinctly, several essential questions of medieval mysticism. How can one speak of a union with God while there remains at all times a distinction between the Creator and the

⁷¹ For the Friars of the Sack, see Elm 1973, p. 275. On the 'clerics' (*clerici*) as the patricians' protégés, see Lefèvre 1942, p. 103. See Reypens 1932b, p. 229, for mention of Groenendaal's *refugium*.

⁷² For the Apocalypse translation quoted by Ruusbroec, see Behaghel 1878, p. 100. Cf. Wackers 1996a, p. 26 and Alford 1973, pp. 8–9, on the interpretation of the text (Rev. 2:17). There is supposedly a connection between the *Stone* and a passage from a Middle Dutch sermon incorporating parts of Rudolf of Biberach's *De septem itinerebus aeternitatis*. There, based on the same biblical quotation, is 'the small sparkling stone in which the new name is written' (*dat blenckende steenkijn daer die nuwe naem in ghescreven staet*) (Van Iterson 1857, p. 161). On the sermon, see Lieftinck 1932, pp. 216–17. More likely than the attribution to Jordanus of Quedlinburg (in Ampe 1963, pp. 28–35) is the assignment of the sermon to the circle of Tauler and Ruusbroec.

created? What is the difference between man's experience of God in his mortal state and the heavenly glory of blessed souls? These were fundamental questions of mystical doctrine on which Ruusbroec had been silent or to which he had paid scant attention in his first texts. In the *Espousals* he had given free rein to his fascination for the transcendental. The *Stone*, by contrast, is a philosophically tinted commentary to that great work, in which Ruusbroec tackled such questions as whether man is left with some knowledge of the encounter with God, even though it is such an overwhelming experience. If not, then this privilege could not possibly be reserved for man alone: 'For if we could find beatitude without knowing, a stone, which has no knowing, could also find bliss. If I were lord of all the earth and did not know it, what would I stand to gain?'⁷³

Setting forth arguments of this kind, Ruusbroec created a text completely different from the ornate *Espousals*, whose artistic, affective prose can scarcely be accommodated in the more analytical *Stone*. The first lines are characteristic of the rest. Here Ruusbroec does not build his text around a biblical motto; instead, he begins with a proposition:

A man who wants to live in the most perfect state offered by the Holy Church must be a zealous and good man, and an inward and spiritual man, and an uplifted man contemplating God, and an out-flowing, common man. If a man combines these four things his state is perfect....⁷⁴

The *Stone* consists of a number of more or less independent chapters, displaying increasing levels of abstraction, which treat first the conditions of the good, spiritual and contemplative person portrayed in the opening lines, then the position of the believer as hireling, servant, friend and son of God, and finally 'how we can become hidden sons of God and possess the contemplative life'.⁷⁵ Resounding in the final chord of the *Stone* is the 'common man' (*ghemeyne mensche*) introduced in the overture. Thus there is the suggestion of coming full circle, even though in the *Stone* Ruusbroec was not striving for the symphonic unity

⁷³ See *Stone* 753–54 and 632–35: 'Want mochte wij salich sijn sonder onse weten, soe mochte oec een steen salich sijn, die gheen weten en heeft. Dat ic heere van al eertrijcke ware ende ics niet en wiste, wat holpe my dat?' For a typification of the *Stone*, see the introduction to the critical edition and Ruh 1996, p. 20, as well as Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, pp. 49–50.

⁷⁴ *Stone* 1–5.

⁷⁵ *Stone* 477–78: 'hoe wij werden moghen verborghene sonen gods ende een scouwende leven besitten'.

of the *Espousals*. The former differs from the latter as an analysis differs from a synthesis, or as the definition of a higher reality differs from the attempt to reach it.

The composition of the *Stone* often seems inspired by the distinctions and definitions of the scholastic *quaestio*, in which systematic reasoning can remove all apparent contradiction from scripture. Ruusbroec does not avoid any line of reasoning: 'I have just told you that we are one with God, and Holy Scripture bears witness to this. But now I want to say that we must always remain other than God, and Holy Scripture bears witness to this as well.'⁷⁶ Ruusbroec convincingly brings his mystical doctrine into line with the indisputable truths of theology and the relevant authoritative opinions. It is no coincidence that Jan van Schoonhoven, in his discussion with Gerson, quoted from the Latin translation of the *Stone* as proof of Ruusbroec's orthodoxy. The mystic had in fact worked hard at it, declining to follow his natural craving for higher understanding and pausing instead to reflect on specific problems: 'With regard to this I have made the following observations' (*Hier na hebbic ghesien aldus*). This sentence is typical of the treatment of the material in the *Stone*. Ruusbroec had indeed consulted the books: not only the Harmony of the Gospels and the Apocalypse in Middle Dutch translations, but also standard handbooks of mystical theology. Moreover, the *Stone* was the first text in which Ruusbroec recorded one of his sources: Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs.⁷⁷

As far as the intellectual setting of the *Stone* is concerned, however, it is the context of the quotation that is particularly significant. Ruusbroec quotes Bernard in a section in which he discusses the difference between

⁷⁶ Stone 641–44: 'Nochtans hebbe ic te hans gheseghet dat wij een met gode sijn, ended at tuycht ons die heylighe scriftuere. Maer nu wille ic segghen dat wij een ander van gode eewelijc bliven moeten, ende dit tuycht oec die scriftuere.' Examples of Ruusbroec's technical approach are to be found in the *Stone*; see 314 and 383 for differences (*onderscheet*) and 542–43 for a definition: 'and that is what I call a contemplative life' (*ende dit noeme ic een scouwende leven*).

⁷⁷ Quotation *Stone* 477–78; Bernard is mentioned in 793. Regarding Schoonhoven's quotation from the *Stone*, see Combes 1945–72, p. 738; Ampe 1975a, pp. 137–38; Ampe 1975b, pp. 236–40. An edition of Jordaens's translation of the *Stone* is to be found in Muller 1921. On Ruusbroec and Bernard, see Ampe 1953. Towards the end of the *Stone* (838–902), Ruusbroec describes how the believer knows he has been united with God if he follows Christ up the 'mountain of our bare mind' (*berch onser bloter ghedachten*), as the disciples Peter, James and John climbed Mount Tabor with Him. Ruusbroec borrowed this biblical image from Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin minor* (see Ruh 1990–99, vol. I, p. 166).

the beatitude of the saints and its mystical foretaste on earth: ‘There is a big difference between the brightness of the saints and the highest brightness we can achieve in this life.’ In Ruusbroec’s day there was much philosophising about this question in the learned circles of the Dominicans, and it seems as though the mystic was seeking, for once, to enter the scholarly debate. His *leitmotiv* in the *Stone* is a passage from the Song of Songs which also serves as the theme of a highly erudite sermon on ‘the contemplation of the divine essence’ (*dat scouwen des gotliken wesens*) in a collection of sermons from the circle of Meister Eckhart.⁷⁸

The *Stone* was a formidable intellectual effort, in which Ruusbroec asked more of Middle Dutch readers than most were able to give. Significantly, the number of surviving manuscripts containing the Latin translation of the *Stone* far exceed those with Ruusbroec’s original vernacular version, even if we add the German manuscripts to the Dutch transmission of the text. This piece of writing appealed to specialists such as Brother Gerard, who expressed his admiration for it, saying that this text alone ‘contained sufficient teaching to point a person towards a perfect life’.⁷⁹ Moreover, Ruusbroec needed relatively few words to impart his pearls of wisdom. The critical edition of the *Stone* fills only forty pages, and the variant apparatus often takes up more than half the page. This modern edition – produced according to the highest standards of philology and with a doctrinal introduction that matches the intellectual standards of the work – certainly helps to make *On the Sparkling Stone* a philosophical gem: a rough diamond, perhaps, but of great value nonetheless.⁸⁰

This metaphor is, however, just as deceptive as the painstakingly prepared scholarly edition of the *Stone* now available. Even the genesis of such a precisely composed treatise will remain shrouded in mystery until we have examined the distinctive characteristics of literature handed down only in manuscript form.

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⁷⁸ Quotation *Stone* 753: ‘Het es groot onderscheet tuschen die claeinheit der heiligen ende die hoochste claeinheit daer wij toe comen in desen levene’; see 751–52 for the quotation (Song of Songs 2:3). See Langenberg 1902, pp. 190–96, for the sermon. See also Warnar 2002b, p. 65, n. 31.

⁷⁹ De Vreese 1895, pp. 16–17: ‘ghenoech leren in heeft om enen mensche te wisen tot enen volmaecten leven’.

⁸⁰ On the transmission of the *Stone*, see Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 332–38. (The

The puzzle begins with the title. *On the Sparkling Stone* has not been its only title and was possibly not even the original one. Brother Gerard, the first to mention the treatise, speaks of *Vanden vingherlinc oft van den blinkenden steen* (*On the Signet Ring or On the Sparkling Stone*). The work naturally became known under the second title, for there is no trace whatsoever of a ring in the text. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the titles *Dat vingherlinc* (*The Signet Ring*) and *Dat hantvingherlijn* (*The Signet Ring for the Hand*) occur in two large manuscripts of Ruusbroec's works, at least one of which was copied directly from the large Groenendaal codex.⁸¹

The origin of the signet ring is a mystery, but we are given a clue to its meaning in a collection of Middle Dutch proverbs and excerpts from a manuscript of around 1450. A paraphrase of the opening lines of the *Stone* is followed by a statement made by an anonymous 'teacher': 'There is no sapphire or diamond that adorns a signet ring (*vingherlijn*) as beautifully as great caution [adorns] a spiritual life. For a good will has often fallen, but due caution never fell.'⁸² The comparison is highly reminiscent of Brother Gerard's double title: the signet ring of the spiritual life that is adorned by the sparkling jewel of caution. What this virtue has to do with the *Stone* is not immediately clear, nor does an obscure note dating from 1450 provide a reliable basis for explaining a title from the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Nonetheless, the compiler of the collection had access to sources from Ruusbroec's immediate circle, as evidenced by a proverb appearing several folios after the signet ring quotation:

It is a human person who delights in practising all virtues. And it is an angelic person who possesses all created things without enjoyment. And it is a godly person who continually contemplates God without intermediary according to his ability.⁸³

text almost always appears in manuscripts containing other texts by Ruusbroec, so it is unlikely to have been distributed independently.) The German translation of the *Stone* is published in Eichler 1968. Brother Gerard quotation in De Vreese 1895, pp. 16–17.

⁸¹ For the manuscripts, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 45 and 43.

⁸² Indestege 1951, p. 87: 'Ten es gheen saphier noch dyamant dat soe wel een vingherlijn ciert als nauwe hoede een gheistelijc leven. Want goeden wille es dicke ghevallen, mer goede hoede en viel nye.' Concerning the manuscript, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 76 and Hogenelst & Van Oostrom 1995, p. 162.

⁸³ Indestege 1951, p. 98: 'Dat es een menschelijc mensche die alle doechden met loste werct. Ende dat es enghels mensche die alle ghescapen dinghen soender ghenuchte besit. Ende dat is een godlike mensche die alle tijt gode aenscouwet sonder middel na sinen vermoghene.'

These same words serve to conclude a text that begins with the oldest surviving excerpt from the *Stone* – inscribed in 1361 in a book produced in Brussels. Only the first part was copied out. The text then continues in the style of the *Stone*, but without any connection to Ruusbroec's work as we know it from the critical edition and the manuscripts. After a few additional considerations, the text closes with the sentences quoted above, the contents of which reflect a watered-down version of Ruusbroec's words, though they seem intended as a recapitulation of the list of qualities demanded of a good, spiritual and contemplative person with which the excerpt of the *Stone* begins. So there probably is a connection between the apocryphal signet ring quotation and the canonical *Stone*, even though the link remains too obscure to provide a satisfactory explanation for the appearance of the signet ring in the title.⁸⁴

These complications arise because Ruusbroec's texts – as observed earlier – soon took on a life of their own among readers and scribes in the circles of Brussels clerics. Moreover, the short text containing the beginning of the *Stone* suggests that the work did not emerge in its definitive version all at once. This is hardly surprising, given the history of the text. Brother Gerard reported in his prologue that Ruusbroec had written the *Stone* after a conversation with a hermit who had urged the mystic to produce 'a text which would explain to the hermit the matters they had discussed, so that he and others could benefit from it'. Only a single sentence of that dialogue has been preserved in the *Stone*, but this does not mean that other traces of the conversation between Ruusbroec and the hermit have not survived. Listeners could have made notes or later recalled what was said about the signet ring of the spiritual life.⁸⁵

At any rate, we must certainly not view the *Stone* solely as an intellectual exercise. The text was the product of the interaction between the mystic and a hermit, whose questions triggered a discussion of the principles of Ruusbroec's mystical philosophy. Unfortunately, Brother Gerard's prologue provides no further information on the identity of the

⁸⁴ Manuscript with excerpts from the *Stone* and quoted passage in Brussels, KB 3067–73, fol. 124v. A section of the intervening text occurs under the name of Meister Eckhart in a slightly different variant in a more or less contemporaneous manuscript (Dolch 1909, section 82b). This is followed in MS. Brussels KB, 3067–73 by a piece which appears in part near the signet ring quotation (see Indestege 1951, p. 99 [no. 87]).

⁸⁵ The quotation from Brother Gerard's prologue can be found in De Vreese 1895, p. 16: 'Ende als sy sceyden souden badt hem die broeder herde seer dat hi hem die redenen die si dair ghehandelt hadden, woude verclaren met enighen gheschriften op dat hi ende anders yemant dies ghebetert mochten werden.'

person with whom Ruusbroec had this learned conversation. The first recorded donat of Groenendaal was Gerardus van den Keldere, alias Clusenare ('hermit'), but it is doubtful whether he was the one to put philosophical questions to Ruusbroec, especially if he is identical with the person recorded in the Middle Dutch version of *De origine* as the simple soul called Gerard, who inadvertently invalidated an important document, to the dismay of the Groenendaal canons, when he melted its wax seal to test whether a spoon was actually made of iron.

There was no shortage of hermits with whom Ruusbroec could have exchanged ideas. In addition to those living in Brussels itself, there were any number of pious souls who had withdrawn to the nearby woods to serve God in solitude. Hermits were living by the pond of Groenendaal as early as 1304, but they were not particularly drawn to mystical philosophy. On the contrary, the Groenendaal hermits excelled mainly at penitence and self-imposed hardship. One of them, Arnoldus van Diest, was said by Pomerius to clothe himself in rags and brew his own beer from mouldy bread. The most important event in the spiritual life of Arnoldus was a vision in which he beheld the graves of dead saints in Rome. This dream was said to be so lifelike that afterward Arnoldus was more familiar with the streets and alleyways of Rome than actual visitors to the Eternal City.⁸⁶

The history of medieval anchorites is dominated by heroes of self-denial and detachment, but there were also learned hermits. The English mystic and writer Richard Rolle, a contemporary of Ruusbroec, studied at Oxford before choosing a life of seclusion. His Dutch counterpart is Gerard Appelmans, whose wide reading of academic texts shines forth from a concise but particularly well-thought-out *Glose op den Pater noster* (*Gloss on the Paternoster*). A barely legible note in the margin of the only manuscript in which this *Gloss* has survived says that the author lived as a hermit, doing penance in the woods. The erudition of his text did not suffer from his solitude; the *Gloss* offers the earliest example of the scholastic idiom in Middle Dutch usage.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ See Dykmans 1940, pp. 53 and 158, on Gerardus van den Keldere; on the spoon, see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 134 (cf. De Leu 1885, p. 281, in the Latin translation the name Gerard is not mentioned). On hermits in the neighbourhood of Brussels, see Verbesselt 1981, pp. 242–43; for those in the city, see Lefèvre 1942, pp. 118–19. See also Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 126–38. On the vision of Arnoldus, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 121–22 (De Leu 1885, p. 269).

⁸⁷ See Watson 1991 on Richard Rolle. On Appelmans, see Reypens 1927 (with edition) and Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 137–49.

The hermit with whom Ruusbroec exchanged ideas was also an expert in the field of mystical thought. In those passages in the *Stone* where scraps of their conversation are overheard, the hermit proves to be very persistent in his striving for higher understanding. To be of service to him, Ruusbroec began with a fairly straightforward exposition of spiritual man, as though initially intending not to go beyond what he said in the first chapters of the *Stone* (which would mean that the earliest excerpt actually reflects the *Urtex*). In any case, Ruusbroec did not at first intend to write anything more than an exposition of the four-fold relationship of the believer to his God as hireling, servant, friend and son. After explaining this, Ruusbroec comes to the conclusion – greatly simplified here – that every person must strive to integrate these four religious lifestyles. This is actually a repetition of the proposition appearing in the opening lines of the *Stone*, and so Ruusbroec's argument comes full circle: '*Ende in deser redenen*' – that is to say, 'with these words' or 'by this reasoning', or 'in this talk' (the last option being the most likely translation, given the genesis of the *Stone*) – 'I have explained to you what I said before in the beginning, namely that every man must, of necessity, obey in all things God and the Holy Church and his own reason... And with this I let be all that has been said.'⁸⁸

Immediately following this seemingly definitive conclusion is an objection that can easily be ascribed to the hermit: 'But I would still like to know how we can become hidden sons of God and possess the contemplative life' (*Maer ic soude noch gherne weten hoe wij werden moghen verborghene sonen gods ende een scouwende leven besitten*). Ruusbroec gives a detailed answer to this question, and concludes the *Stone* with a word about 'a common life, which I promised to tell you about in the beginning' (*een ghemein leven, daer ic u ave gheloefde te segghen inden beghinne*). He had in fact held out the prospect of this at the beginning of the *Stone*. Elaborating on the 'common life' in the closing section, Ruusbroec provides the hermit with a final answer.⁸⁹

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⁸⁸ *Stone* 472–74, 474–76: 'hebbic u verclaert dat ic vore seide inden beghinne, dat was dat elc mensche van node ghehoorsam moet sijn in allen dinghen gode ende der heiligher kercken ende sijnre eyghenre redenen... Ende hier mede latic sijn al dat gheseghet es.'

⁸⁹ Quotations from *Stone* 477–78 and 934–35.

Much has been written about the place of the ‘common life’ (*ghemeyn leven*) and the ‘common man’ (*ghemeyne mensche*) within the system of Ruusbroec’s mysticism, but no one has yet come up with a completely satisfactory definition of these concepts. One serious drawback is the lack of an adequate translation in modern Dutch and hence in other modern languages. The adjective *ghemeyn* has a wide range of possible meanings in English, including ‘common’, ‘communal’, ‘collective’, ‘shared’, ‘united’ and so on. Repeated attempts have been made to find a synonym other than ‘common’, one which would do justice to the more specific, mystical connotations of the word in Ruusbroec’s notion of the *ghemeyn leven*, by which he sought to suggest how activity and contemplation should be combined in the life of those who seek God.⁹⁰

The history of medieval thought has traditionally distinguished between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*: roughly speaking, ordinary life in the world and life according to the special rules and privileges of the religious state. In the fourteenth century it was no longer self-evident that the contemplative seclusion of hermitage and cloister was preferable to the industriousness that kept society going; Ruusbroec still adhered to the classical view that the best life was one devoted to God, but he realised that the individual search for higher things could conflict with the collective duty to do good works in the active life. As early as the *Realm*, Ruusbroec wrote that everyone was obliged to do ‘works of charity’ (*werke van karitaten*). Those who disobeyed that precept – as the followers of the Free Spirit were often said to do – might even forfeit the highest privilege of all: the contemplation of God.⁹¹

Like other mystical preachers and writers, Ruusbroec sought a solution that brought the contemplation of God into balance with the fulfilment of the commandments of the Christian creed. His answer was the model of the ‘common life’ (*ghemeyn leven*), in which there is no conflict between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. The spiritual bliss derived from the enjoyment of the Godhead enriches other parts

⁹⁰ For a clear picture of Ruusbroec’s *ghemeyn leven*, see Reypens 1931, pp. 168–78; for a more detailed – though not uncontested – description, see Fraling 1974. For a view with far less emphasis on a particular meaning, see Ruh 1996, p. 21, n. 62. Cf. Warnar 1995b, pp. 14–15 and 22.

⁹¹ *Realm* 530–32: ‘works of charity are commanded us. But contemplation, however supernatural, without works of charity, would turn to nothing’ (*werke van caritaten die sijn ons gheboden; ende scouwen, al waert oec overnatuerlijc, sonder werken van caritaten: het ghinghe te nieute*).

of life as well. The 'common man' lives in a state that makes him continually receptive to higher contemplation, so that, 'full of truth and rich in all virtues', he can function better in the world.⁹²

Ruusbroec's 'common man' (*ghemeyne mensche*) first appears at the end of the *Realm*, but it is not until the *Stone* that he is clearly portrayed as a balanced person, harmoniously combining the active and the contemplative life. Ruusbroec's renewed interest in this theme and the treatise he eventually produced were doubtless the result of his meeting with the hermit, whose individualistic path to perfection was threatening to cause a lapse into overly eccentric mysticism. In the urbanised fourteenth century, the life of a hermit had an air of fashionable mystique. Ruusbroec, however, included retreating to the wilderness (*in de woestine te ligghene*) among the forms of feigned piety aimed primarily at personal recognition. Jan van Leeuwen was even more sceptical, comparing hermits to wandering minstrels 'who never felt more ill at ease than at home'. One text that discussed hermits and their living conditions accused them of leading increasingly worldly lives, likening them to the innkeeper who continued to admit guests until late at night.⁹³

Hermits were held in disrepute mainly because they were said to use their religious ideals as an excuse to shirk their social duties. This mistrust was directed at both good and bad hermits, in Ruusbroec's opinion. Perhaps his acquaintance with the hermit had set him thinking, for he asked himself, precisely in the *Stone*, why introspective people were judged harshly and censured for spending their days in supposed idleness. Ruusbroec disagreed with this opinion, but was fully aware that such reproofs were not completely groundless, for there were indeed 'foolish people who want to be so inward and so given to doing nothing that they do not want to work for their fellow Christians in need, or

⁹² Stone 936–37: 'The man who is sent by God down from these heights, into the world, is full of truth and rich in all virtues' (*Die mensche die ute deser hoocheit van gode neder ghesent wert inde werelt, hi es vol der waerheit ende rijke van allen doechden*). Cf. also Stone 936–61. The 'person common (to all)' (*ghemeyn mensche*) already occurred in the *Realm* (100/12–16), though still as a fairly abstract figure, whose contours become clear only in the light of his predecessors. More particularly, Ruusbroec elaborated upon ideas of Hadewijch, who in turn quoted William of St Thierry in *Letter* 18/112–17 (Van Mierlo 1947); cf. Reynaert 1981b, p. 207. On the medieval question of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, see Warnar 2002a, pp. 31–33, and the literature listed there.

⁹³ See Hamilton 1986, pp. 181–88, on the reputation of medieval hermits. Ruusbroec's notion is to be found in *Espousals* b841 and cf. *Letters* 3; Van Leeuwen quotation in De Vooy's 1915–16, pp. 244–45; the hermit's text in Lievens 1962, p. 24.

serve them'. The grace of divine contemplation does not relieve one of the obligation to love one's neighbour. There is no text in which Ruusbroec does not stress this proposition, but it is particularly germane to the *Stone*, where it is announced in the opening lines: 'A man who wants to live in the most perfect state offered by the Holy Church' must be a good and spiritual man who contemplates God – in short, a 'common man' (*ghemeyne mensche*).⁹⁴

Whether Ruusbroec was able to persuade the hermit of the benefits of this harmonious mode of life remains unknown, but the mystic certainly met with a sympathetic response from his pupils at Groenendaal. Willem Jordaens and Godfried Wevel expounded in their Middle Dutch texts the same standpoint as their prior, and even used the notion of a *ghemeyn leven*. Jan van Leeuwen preached a wholesome combination of work and prayer, which actually boiled down to a practical variant of Ruusbroec's model. The cook of Groenendaal, faithful to his confessor, wrote that the active life was good and necessary, that 'free inner contemplation' (*vri inwendech scouwen*) was even better, but 'contemplation and work, both at once, that is the very best' (*scouwen ende werken, beyde te samen, dats alre best*).⁹⁵

Ruusbroec's disciples could look to his texts for guidance, of course, but they could also observe his daily example of how to combine the *vita activa* and *contemplativa*. According to Brother Gerard, Ruusbroec knew how 'he could work in earthly things and rest in God at the same time' (*hi conste werken in ertsche dinghen ende rusten in Gode te samen*). This also had its disadvantages. Ruusbroec made himself useful at the priory, working the land until he was quite old, although sometimes he was so lost in thought while weeding that he pulled out the medicinal herbs as well. The canons did not hold their prior's absent-mindedness

⁹⁴ See *Stone* 355–76 (quotation 374–76): 'nu ventmen selcke dorre menschen die alsoe innich ende alsoe ledich willen sijn dat si noch werken noch dienen en willen in node haers evenkerstens'.

⁹⁵ In a wider context, see Warnar 1995b, pp. 17–20; for the quotation, cf. Warnar 1992, p. 282. Willem Jordaens criticised those who 'seek to be so overly engrossed in the contemplative life that they refuse to accept those who practise the active life because their inner emptiness would be disturbed' (*soe overnemende sijn willen inden schouwenden leven dat sij hen des werckenden levens niet aen en nemen willen omdat haerder inwindegher ledicheyt hinderen soude*). They have therefore chosen the best part, but not the whole: 'that is a common life' (*dat es een ghemeyn leven*) (Reypens 1967, pp. 57/119–22 and 131–32). In *On the Twelve Virtues* – a text attributed to Ruusbroec in numerous manuscripts, though it was probably written by another Groenendaal author (Godfried Wevel) – the 'common life' (*ghemeen leven*) is described in similar terms (*Virtues*, p. 260).

against him, but rather took it as proof of a unique life of the mind undisturbed by other activities.⁹⁶

The Groenendaal episode has brought us to a new phase in Ruusbroec's life, in which he will emerge as the spiritual leader of a new community. He wrote the *Stone* while still a chaplain in Brussels, energetically attacking the major questions in the metaphysics of mysticism. However, both the text and the meeting with the hermit that prompted him to write it show the author for the first time in his role as mentor and ideologue. Seen in this light, the *Stone* was not only the crowning of Ruusbroec's teachings thus far, but also a new beginning.

⁹⁶ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 154 and De Leu 1885, pp. 297–98 (Pomerius); De Vreese 1895, p. 9 (Brother Gerard).

CHAPTER IV

GROENENDAAL

1. Farewell to Brussels

If Ruusbroec's departure from Brussels really signified the watershed in his life that historians later made it out to be, then remarkably little was said about it in the oldest report of his move. Brother Gerard's prologue contains only the rather casual comment that Ruusbroec eventually wished to withdraw 'from the masses of people' (*uter menichte vanden luden*). The mystic's new home was 'a mile east of Brussels, in the Zonien Forest, in a place called Green Valley [Groenendaal], where formerly a hermitage stood in which an anchorite had lived'.¹ The accuracy with which Brother Gerard reported Ruusbroec's change of address contrasts sharply with his brief mention of the move itself. The Carthusian thought it only natural that Ruusbroec's life in the city should come to an end. A mystic, after all, is not a man of the world.

For Pomerius, on the other hand, Ruusbroec's removal to the Zonien Forest was obviously a matter of significance, but only from the perspective of Groenendaal's history and not as a momentous event in Ruusbroec's life. The protagonists in the story of the monastery's founding are Coudenberg and Hinckaert; their mystical friend played a less active role. The chapters Pomerius devotes to the life of Ruusbroec make only oblique reference to this move: in the quiet of the Zonien Forest, far from the pernicious influences of the world, the mystic could give himself over completely to contemplation. The Middle Dutch version of *De origine* adds that the books Ruusbroec wrote in these quiet surroundings are proof that at Groenendaal – more so than 'in the barren world' (*in die verdorrede werelt*) – he progressed to a higher contemplative life.²

The chronicler does not say by what standards the reader should measure the higher mystical content of Ruusbroec's later works, though no

¹ De Vreese 1895, p. 8: 'suit oest van Bruesele, op een mile int wout van Sonien, in een dal dat hiet Gronen dal, dair voortijts een cluse stont om een clusenaeer'.

² Verdeyen 1981b, p. 140 (cf. De Leu 1885, p. 287).

one would deny that the rustic tranquillity of Groenendaal offered better prospects for a life of contemplation than the noisy city surrounding the Hinckaerts' townhouses in Brussels. Ruusbroec, who was intensely aware of the signs of God's presence in the beauty of Creation, no doubt gained a great deal of inspiration in the open air of the Zonien Forest: 'one step outside the walls of the simple monastery brought the prior into the garden (where he was often seen weeding, though he sometimes absent-mindedly pulled out the medicinal herbs along with the weeds), and all round the monastery lay God's unspoiled nature in all its rich diversity and quiet splendour. In the orchard and on the mossy slopes, under the swaying tree-tops of the Zonien Forest, Ruusbroec's imagination must often have been stirred by the flowers, plants and animals.'

These words come from the *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde* (*History of Dutch Literature*) by Gerrit Kalf, who was certainly not the only one to conjure up a vivid image of the mystic living in the countryside, communing with nature. We cannot pretend, however, that Ruusbroec left the city to seek intellectual enrichment in such rustic surroundings. The magnificent nature symbolism deployed in the *Realm* and the *Espousals* had taken root in the shadow of the Church of St Gudula and was largely nourished by information gleaned from books. Ruusbroec's Brussels works, moreover, betray no sign of a deep-felt longing for seclusion. He had broken his ties to the world in the depths of his soul, not in the woods outside Brussels.³

Speculation as to the real reasons for Ruusbroec's departure for the Zonien Forest have already created quite a stir, resulting in much-discussed theories, perhaps the most notorious being that the mystic and his kindred spirits had set up Groenendaal as an outpost of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, which according to the old prophecies of Joachim of Fiore would usher in the end of (redemptive) history. This Italian abbot and his mysterious predictions of a heaven on earth held a great attraction for religious fortune-seekers throughout the Middle Ages. Paul O'Sheridan, a Flemish historian of Irish descent working in the first decades of the twentieth century, argued that Ruusbroec and his followers were among those overcome by the promises of millenarianism. One of Joachim's prophecies was that the thousand-year reign would begin with the advent of a new spiritual

³ Kalf 1906, p. 402. See also Van Mierlo 1931, pp. 211–15. On the nature of late-medieval mysticism, compare in this context McGinn 1996, pp. 198–201.

elite composed of clerics who would take the place of the old monastic orders. In several controversial publications, O'Sheridan argued that Ruusbroec and his followers in Groenendaal were the self-appointed forerunners of this new order of clerics.⁴

O'Sheridan claimed that Groenendaal's unusual status was compelling proof of his sensational theory. When Ruusbroec settled in the Zonien Forest with Vranke vanden Coudenberg and Jan Hinckaert, the only legitimisation their community of priests had was the letter in which Duke Jan III had given Vranke vanden Coudenberg the lands and pond of Groenendaal and granted permission for five men to take up residence in the existing hermitage. The duke's only proviso was that two of the five men be priests and that they devote themselves to worship, in a chapel – still to be built – to honour the memory of his late wife, Duchess Marie d'Evreux.

That was a fairly shaky foundation for sweeping allegations of a hotbed of millenarianism at Groenendaal. Would the ducal authorities actually have become involved in such a controversial movement? It is extremely doubtful, and the fact that Joachimism barely gained a foothold in the Low Countries makes it highly unlikely. Related ideas do surface sporadically in Middle Dutch texts, but not often enough to make a reasonable case for Ruusbroec's supposed infatuation with the thousand-year reign. O'Sheridan found few followers. Indeed, the most remarkable upshot of his wild theories was to give the founders of Groenendaal an enduring reputation for religious libertinism. Scholars, also after O'Sheridan, thought it significant that the three priests had refused to take the vows of an existing order. This was a courageous choice in those days, because the Church sought to curb alternative religious groups by confining spiritual life to a limited number of permissible orders. In deciding to live simply as priests – and nothing more – the three friends were deliberately swimming against the tide.⁵

But we must beware of endowing Groenendaal retrospectively with a revolutionary aura, for everything was kept neatly within the bounds

⁴ See O'Sheridan 1914. An overview of his other contributions to Ruusbroec studies and the reactions to them can be found in Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 227–28 and Ampe 1975a, pp. 619–34.

⁵ On the canonical status of Groenendaal, see Burger 1993, pp. 32–33 and Verdeyen 1981a, pp. 34–40. On Joachim of Fiore, see Lambert 1992, pp. 189–205. The Brabantine chronicler Lodewijk van Velthem is the only Middle Dutch author who mentions Joachim of Fiore by name (in the *Spiegel historiael*, 7th book, verses 2408–82; see Vander Linden 1906–38, vol. III). See also Pleij 1996, pp. 333–42.

of ecclesiastical law. The priests of the new chapel formally belonged to the parish of nearby Hoeilaart. The parish priest of that village was in turn subject to the authority of the Chapter of St Gudula and was consequently appointed by the burgrave of Brussels. At first, Coudenberg, Hinckaert and Ruusbroec, living at the former hermitage of Groenendaal, were in the same position they had been at the Collegiate Church of St Gudula.⁶

Even so, it is not insignificant that the three friends converted to the old principles of the *vita apostolica*. 'Back to the source of Christian life' was a message propagated by a number of reforming religious movements in the Middle Ages. The basis of the apostolic life is to be found in the passages from the Acts of the Apostles (2:42–47 and 4:32–35) that describe the communal life of the first Christians. Ruusbroec quotes these passages in his great Groenendaal opus, *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*:

And in common the apostles daily broke the living bread of the Holy Sacrament for them, and they also (provided for) their bodily necessities, for no one had goods proper to him, but all was common. And if anyone sold his property, he brought the money to the feet of the apostles. And they divided it and gave to each what he needed. And they were all of one heart and of one mind and of one will in charity.⁷

This evangelical precept was held in high regard in the Middle Ages as a guiding principle for communal life in religious communities. Moreover, the secular clergy serving collegiate churches had traditionally lived according to apostolic principles, and it is from that perspective that Ruusbroec viewed matters. He points out the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), who joined the first Christian community, but secretly kept some of their possessions. When their duplicity was discovered, they both died of fright. Ruusbroec sees their fate as a warning to the 'prelates and priests of the Holy Church who are more

⁶ Verbesselt 1994.

⁷ *Tabernacle* 5:4785–90: 'Ende ghemeinleec alle daghe braken hen die apostele dat levende broet des heilichs sacraments ende oec lijfleke noetdorft; want niemen en hadde proper goet, maer al ghemeine. Ende so wie sijn erve vercochte, hi brachte den scat vore der apostele voete. Ende si deilden dat ende gaven ieghewelken dies hem noet was. Ende si waren alle eens herten ende eens moeds ende eens willen in karitaten'; see also the preceding passage (5:4716 ff.). On the *vita apostolica*, see Grundmann 1961, pp. 14–18 and passim; McDonnell 1954, pp. 141–53 and 1955; Lynch 1992, pp. 192–95; Lawrence 1994, pp. 15–19. These studies treat in particular the first blossoming of the *vita apostolica* in the twelfth century. For later manifestations, especially the Devotio Moderna, see Mertens 1994, p. 231; in connection with Ruusbroec, see Warnar 1999a, pp. 375–79.

bent on obtaining goods and worldly honour than God's honour and the salvation of their people'.⁸

Ruusbroec observed with sorrow that the Holy Church had two sides – good and bad – ‘but it seems that Satan has more disciples than Christ’. Everything in the Church was for sale; its governors were rich in goods but poor in virtues. Such criticisms were common in Ruusbroec's Groenendaal texts, and he was just as outspoken about who the true servants of God were. He contrasts ‘the greedy priests who always crave possessions’ (*die ghierighe papen, die altoes om hebben gapen*) with the shining example of good clerics, who are ‘sober and pure, gentle and humble of heart, merciful, peaceful and generous, patient, obedient and docile, simple, wise and prudent, stable in virtues, mature in morals, sensible and of good counsel’. They are, moreover, glad of spirit, uplifted in heart and rich in virtues; there is ‘truth in their words, judiciousness in their speech, and sweetness flowing from their voices’. Their hearts and their innermost beings are open. They are attentive to every need, easily satisfied with food and drink, and ‘untroubled by coarse garments’ (*onbecommert met groven abite*, which could also mean ‘unflustered by rude behaviour’). This list of the qualities of an exemplary priest ends on a perfectly clear note: one must partake moderately of the necessities of life, giving all surplus to the poor. ‘That is the life of a good priest’ (*Dat es goeder priesters vite*).⁹

This profile of the ordained cleric is to be found in *On the Twelve Beguines*, Ruusbroec's last work, but the words sound like the principles governing his life as a priest, which began anew in Groenendaal and deeply influenced his writings. An obvious change with respect to the works written in Brussels is Ruusbroec's close attention to the priesthood. His spirit may have been uplifted to unprecedented heights in the Zonien Forest, but his texts were tied much more concretely than before to his living conditions. To gain some understanding of the shift in Ruusbroec's interests it will be necessary first of all to examine the circumstances of his departure from Brussels.

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⁸ *Tabernacle* 5:4803–19: ‘prelate ende priestere der heiligher kerken die meer staen na goet ende eere der werelt dan na die eere gods ende salicheit haers volcs’.

⁹ *Beguines* 2b/1380: ‘maer het scijnt dat Sathanas meer discipulen heeft dan Cristus’. *Beguines* 2b/1453–65: ‘sober ende reyne, saecht ende oetmoedich van herten, ghenadich, vreedsam ende milde, ghedoechsam, ghehoorsam ende ghelatens willen, sempel, wijs ende vroet, in duechden ghestadich, rijp van seden, constich ende ghenadich...inden

The history of Groenendaal begins in Brussels, where three priests of respectable origins, lifestyle and behaviour led a communal life. Thus reads the opening of a short account of Groenendaal's founding, written by the monastery archivist Sayman van Wijc at the beginning of an *obituarium* compiled for the brothers of the community. After consulting this document, Pomerius related in *De origine* approximately the same information about Coudenberg, Hinckaert and Ruusbroec. After the first two had renounced their benefices and ecclesiastical incomes, they came together to lead an independent existence in 'a life of greater devotion and holiness'. They went daily to the Church of St Gudula to sing the psalms and hymns of the canonical hours. This was not without its problems, for the three priests were hampered in their liturgical prayers by the noisiness of their fellow clerics. In particular, it was the chaplain Godfried Kerreken, singing loudly and out of tune, who repeatedly drove Ruusbroec and his friends to break off their prayers and start again. Finally, at their wits' end, they decided to seek refuge elsewhere.¹⁰

Doubts have repeatedly been cast on the veracity of the chroniclers' version of events, for surely the ongoing construction of the collegiate church would have been more of a nuisance than Chaplain Kerreken's atrocious singing. But what seems to us a silly incident was made so much of in the annals of Groenendaal that it cannot be ignored. Kerreken's inharmonious intoning was not the worst conceivable breach of clerical office, but as a sign of the prevailing morale of the clergy of St Gudula's, his contribution to the liturgy was deplorable enough. After all, the *raison d'être* of a collegiate church consisted in the splendour of its celebration of Divine Office. To heighten its allure, detailed liturgical scripts were drawn up, an attempt was made to motivate as many clerics as possible to attend divine worship, and the pupils at the chapter school were pressed into service as choristers. Perhaps their choirmaster emphasised the seriousness of the matter by telling them the story of the demon Titivillus, who went about during Divine Office collecting the altar boys' out-of-tune notes, to be weighed in the balance on Judgement Day.¹¹

monde waerheit, inden woorden besceedenheit ende inder stemmen uutvloeyende sueticheit'.

¹⁰ See Dykmans 1940, pp. 1–4, for the text by Sayman van Wijc; for the quotation of Pomerius, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 126–27 (De Leu 1885, p. 273).

¹¹ On the historicity of the episode, see Axters 1962, pp. 124–25, with a list of older literature. See Clanchy 1999, p. 62 and De Vooy 1926, p. 166, on the *exemplum* of Titivillus.

According to this *exemplum*, Chaplain Kerreken would get his just deserts in the hereafter, but this did not make it any easier for an irreproachable cleric like Ruusbroec to stomach this disturbance to the harmony of Divine Office. The general lack of enthusiasm shown by his colleagues was pure torture to him. In the *Tabernacle* – written at Groenendaal, but at a time when recollections of the collegiate church were still fresh in his mind – Ruusbroec gave free rein to his dissatisfaction. Only when there was money to be earned did clerics attend Mass. When there was no profit in it, the bells could be rung until they broke, but no one would appear except the vicars choral and hired priests (*vicarise ende mercenarise*), who were paid starvation wages to carry out the liturgical tasks of the canons. The grand seigneurs came only on high feast days, and when they did condescend to grace divine worship with their presence, they were a source of unrest: ‘they chatter among themselves, or they keep altogether silent, or they go out hastily on any little pretext, for the service of our Lord is not to their taste’. All the more objectionable, then, was their craving for possessions, for those who already had four or five prebends did their best to pocket even more.¹²

Ruusbroec himself had started his ecclesiastical career as a hired priest. If indeed these statements were based on his own experience, Brussels clerics sorely lacked a work ethic. The *Tabernacle* has often been cited as an indication of the dubious morale of the clerics attached to the Brussels collegiate church, but it is risky to form a picture of the situation based on personal opinions expressed in literary texts. On the other hand, more factual sources strengthen the impression that the canons spent more hours of the day dealing with business than singing the Divine Office. The frequent absence of the canons at divine worship was notorious, but in 1328 those same lords of the Church had a precise record made of the exact revenues and properties on which their prebends were based.¹³

In Ruusbroec’s day, anyone holding idealistic views of the priesthood must have been dismayed at the frequent failure of reality to live up to the ideal – especially in the secular chapters. The strong growth of these ecclesiastical institutions had led to a high degree of organisation and

¹² See, among other places, *Tabernacle* 5:6033–35 (‘si clappen underlinghe ochte si swighen te male, ochte si gaen haesteleec uute met cleinen ocsune. Want die dienst ons heren en smaect hen niet’) and 5:5996 ff.

¹³ De Ridder 1987–88, vol. I, pp. 15–17 and 47–49.

extremely professional management. While organisational improvement did not necessarily bring about a decline in devotion, the canons' obvious material comfort deprived them of the benefit of the doubt. Little was left in the chapters of their original 'common life'. The clerics had their own incomes and could live well from them. With the rise of religious groups that advocated a return to apostolic principles, the canons, with private wealth derived from their ecclesiastical office, increasingly came to embody the decadence of the Church.¹⁴

Such discrepancies often led to tension, as was perhaps the case in Brussels, when Ruusbroec and his friends provoked the collegiate clergy by demonstratively choosing a new way of life, for the three priests were still in Brussels when they began to practise the *vita apostolica* recommended by Ruusbroec in his Groenendaal texts. The turning point seems to have been not so much the licence granted by Duke Jan III in 1343 as Hinckaert's previously mentioned conversion to a better life in about 1335. He and Coudenberg had renounced their prebends and resolved to live communally 'from what God had given them' (*van dat god hen verleent had*). This act, which according to both Sayman van Wijc and Pomerius marked the beginning of Groenendaal, must have been experienced by the clerics of the Brussels chapter as a painful infringement of their *esprit de corps*. Coudenberg, Hinckaert and Ruusbroec publicly turned their backs on their former brothers in the Chapter of St Gudula, who – in the presence of the Brussels congregation – were exposed as clerics less interested in the evangelical principles of their priestly office.

Such behaviour could easily arouse the resentment of the established clergy. Lodewijk van Velthem related in his chronicles the story of Brother IJsewijn, who trekked through the Rhine Valley and the Duchy of Brabant, preaching apostolic poverty. Everywhere he went, IJsewijn was initially admired but always ended up at odds with those offended by his caustic sermons, in which he condemned excessive wealth. The clerics of St Gudula's were not given to self-criticism either, when their money and goods were at stake. The lector of the Brussels Friars Minor learned this lesson first-hand in 1414, when he openly criticised the greed of the secular clergy in one of his sermons. Together with his prior, the lector was immediately summoned to appear before the disgruntled canons of St Gudula, who demanded that the preacher

¹⁴ Marchal 1999–2000, esp. pp. 35–52. See also Van den Hoven van Genderen 1997. Cf. Lynch 1992, p. 193.

publicly retract his words in a statement prepared by the chapter's leaders. Feelings seem not to have run so high when Coudenberg and Hinckaert broke with the chapter, but the other clerics of the collegiate church doubtless disapproved of their manoeuvre – certainly if the three proclaimed their evangelical idealism in the polemical tone later taken by Ruusbroec in the *Tabernacle* and the *Beguines*. Remarks considered outrageous, such as the assertion that the disciples of Judas governed the Church, must have caused ill-feeling among Ruusbroec's former confrères, including Chaplain Kerreken, whose discordant droning may well have been a deliberate attempt to make life in Brussels impossible for the apostolic priests.¹⁵

Once Ruusbroec and his friends had finally broken all ties with the chapter, it was not easy for them to participate in the communal singing of Divine Office. It seems that the three went along to the collegiate church on the off chance of being allowed to sing the canonical hours. The Latin version of *De origine* speaks of their presence at the hours of Divine Office, whereas the Middle Dutch version suggests that they recited the liturgical prayers on their own and at odd times. The latter possibility sounds more plausible, considering that the strict statutes of the chapter allowed the chaplains to recite their daily Mass only at the appointed times. Revealing indeed is the cautious wording with which Sayman van Wijc stated that Coudenberg, Hinckaert and Ruusbroec – after renouncing their benefices – succeeded, though not without courting displeasure, in celebrating the Divine Office.¹⁶

In the end it was Vranke vanden Coudenberg who took steps to end this disagreeable situation. According to the Middle Dutch edition of *De origine*, he was on good terms with the duke, and thus secured his permission to found a new chapel in Groenendaal. Perhaps Jan III acted out of respect for Marie d'Evreux, reputed to have been exceptionally

¹⁵ Lefèvre 1942, p. 110, on the lector of the Friars Minor. For Velthem's views on Brother IJsewijn, see the continuation of the *Spiegel historiael*, 1st book, chapters 31–34 (see Vander Linden 1906–38, vol. I).

¹⁶ Middle Dutch version of *De origine*: 'which is why these [three priests] were in the habit of frequenting the Church of St Gudula daily at the appropriate times in order to perform commendably the psalms and hymns in their celebration of Divine Office' (*daer om dese oec dagelijcs die kerke van sinte Goedelen plagen ten behoerliken tiden te frequenteren om daer in hoer ghetiden inden psalmen ende ynnen lovelijck te betalen*) (Verdeyen 1981b, p. 128; cf. De Leu 1885, p. 275). Sayman van Wijc: 'In ecclesia Beate Gudile Bruxellensi, beneficiorum quippe quamquam exiguorum oneribus aggravati, continue, non sine magno tedio horas canonicas cum choro devotissime persolvebant' (Dykmans 1940, p. 1). On the chaplains' celebration of Mass, see De Ridder 1987–88, vol. I, p. 41.

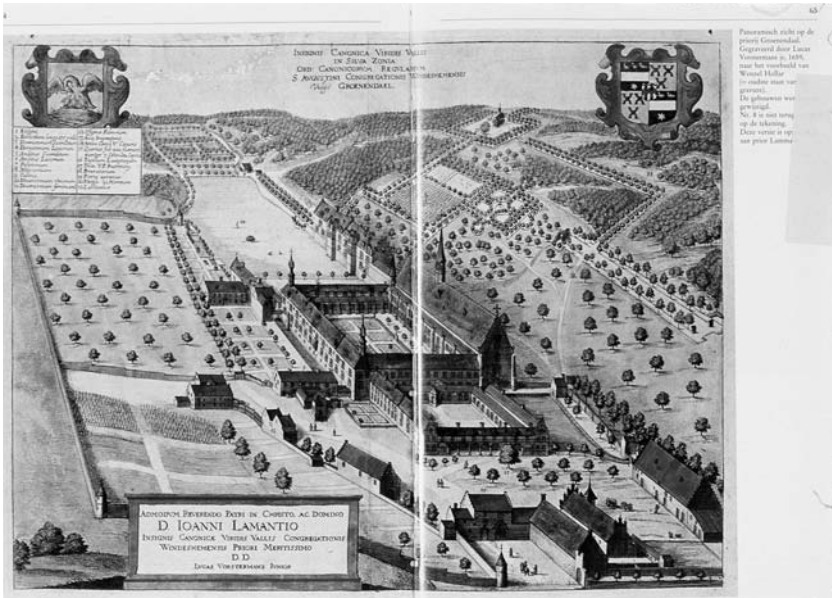


Fig 6 Bird's-eye view of Groenendaal in the year 1649.

devout, since the new chapel at Groenendaal was built to honour her memory. Whatever the reasons, Ruusbroec's departure for the Zonien Forest was more a practical solution than a principled choice.

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On 12 March 1345 – nearly two years after Duke Jan III had sealed the deed of conveyance, handing over Groenendaal to the priests – the new chapel was consecrated by Matthias of Cologne, the suffragan of Cambrai and auxiliary bishop of Brussels. At the same time, Vranke vanden Coudenberg was appointed *curatus* and put in charge of the group of new residents. These included, in addition to himself, the priests Jan van Ruusbroec and Jan Hinckaert, as well as two laymen: Jan van Leeuwen – who will be discussed in more detail later – and Walter Rademaker, about whom we know only that his father gave lands to Vranke vanden Coudenberg within a week of the consecration of the new chapel. At first the community was confined to this small company of five pious men, which was in accordance with the duke's proviso. Even though this condition was probably not adhered to very strictly, there cannot have been a great flood of newcomers in the first years of the community's existence. Jan Spieghel or Cureghem, the fifth on the list of canons (after Coudenberg and Ruusbroec and two others), seems not to have joined Groenendaal's ranks before 1351. Nicolaas van Herentals, alias Bolle, the seventh on the list of lay brothers, was not welcomed to the community until 1362.

As difficult as it is to ascertain the number and identity of the small community's first residents, it is even more complicated to visualise their living conditions. Visitors to the place where the priory once stood no longer find any sign of Ruusbroec's accommodations. The chapel to which the mystic regularly withdrew was replaced before the end of the fourteenth century by a priory church. The old hermitage, which had served the duke as a hunting lodge, must have been renovated and enlarged even earlier to provide accommodation for the brothers and their guests. Perhaps the lay brothers, such as the mason Hendrik van Lummene and the carpenter Nicolaas van Lombeke, contributed their skills to such building projects.¹⁷

¹⁷ Dykmans 1940, pp. 48, 49 and 53 (Walter Rademaker, Nicolaas van Herentals and Hendrik van Lummene) and Indestege 1974, pp. 233–34 (Jan Spieghel). See Verjans 1931, p. 298 and Jansen 1943, p. 48, on the new church and the extension of the priory.

When Ruusbroec settled in the Zonien Forest, the facilities were undoubtedly a good deal more comfortable than the straitened circumstances of the early hermits of Groenendaal, whose blatant display of self-denial and penitence was foreign to Ruusbroec: ‘Riches wisely used and generously shared with the poor in honour of God: this uncovers the way that remains concealed from the hypocritical and the unwilling poor.’¹⁸ The mystic and his companions lived in a voluntary simplicity made possible by their basic material well-being. Viewed matter-of-factly, the success of Groenendaal would have been inconceivable if its founders could not have afforded to let others share in their wealth. The considerable fortunes of Hinckaert and Coudenberg guaranteed that the apostolic dream did not founder on the rocks of poverty and want. Indeed, Groenendaal was soon prospering. Walter Rademaker’s father was followed in the chronicles by the names of many other benefactors. Their donations contributed to the flying start of a new community that could not live on priestly ideals alone.

The élan of the small Groenendaal community (flourishing in the shadow of the large, centuries-old abbeys in and around Brussels) was undoubtedly due to Ruusbroec, its great spiritual leader, though more practical-minded persons must be credited with its rapid growth. Ruusbroec probably did not contribute much to the daily running of things at the chapel – and later the priory – of Groenendaal. The real burden of work was shouldered by the lay brothers. The administration was firmly in the hands of Coudenberg, who according to Pomerius was so taken up with ‘the worries of his offices in external affairs’ that he scarcely had time for contemplation.¹⁹ From the pious perspective of monastic history, this is referred to as a sacrifice, but in reality Coudenberg may well have had more talent for the practical side of monastic life. The author of his eulogy in the Groenendaal *obituarium* took pains to mention that Coudenberg had served as an adviser not only to the duke of Brabant but also to the bishop of Cambrai and the municipal authorities of Brussels. Moreover, Coudenberg had been much in demand as a testamentary executor, for he was extremely thoroughgoing in such matters. Coudenberg did not even hesitate, in the interests of Groenendaal, to take legal action against members of

¹⁸ *Rungs* 640–42.

¹⁹ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 135: ‘die becommertheit van sijne officien inden uutweyn-digen dingen’.

his own family to secure certain bonds, before they could attempt to reclaim his property, which meanwhile belonged to Groenendaal.²⁰

Coudenberg did not have Ruusbroec's charisma, but his prompt and methodical action contributed much to the success of Groenendaal. His most important act as *curatus* was to reorganise the community of priests into a house of canons regular, mainly for financial reasons. Their affiliation with an ecclesiastically recognised order ensured the inhabitants of Groenendaal that their individual possessions became the property of the institution and thus exempt from inheritance tax. In early March 1350 Coudenberg went to consult the bishop of Cambrai; it took only a few days to settle matters. The bishop accompanied Coudenberg back to Groenendaal, and on 10 March 1350 Coudenberg and Ruusbroec received from the bishop's hands the habit of the Canons Regular of St Augustine. The division of labour was obvious: Coudenberg, as provost, assumed the role of principal administrator; Ruusbroec, as prior, became the official spiritual leader.²¹

Within the community the two men naturally complemented one another, but curiously enough, the sources say very little about how they got along, in spite of the fact that the two worked and lived together intensively for at least forty years. It is indeed noteworthy that the scant information does not even hint at a warm personal relationship. Both Brother Gerard and Pomerius report Ruusbroec's exemplary obedience to the provost, but add that they differed on several matters of vital importance to Groenendaal. When Coudenberg sought to reorganise the community in a way that would make it easier to admit others, 'the priest Jan [van Ruusbroec] would rather have done without all these people', according to Brother Gerard. In the end Ruusbroec gave in, because he 'felt that Vranke sought to increase the love of God in many persons'. Coudenberg could not convince Hinckaert at all of the value, indeed the necessity, of innovation. The old chaplain declined to make his profession, and had a hermit's dwelling built for himself in the neighbourhood of Groenendaal.²²

²⁰ Regarding Coudenberg's eulogy in the *obituarium*, see Dykmans 1940, pp. 213 and 208. See Reyens 1932b, p. 229, for the quotation concerning the bonds.

²¹ Verdeyen 1981a, pp. 51–57.

²² For the quotations, see De Vreese 1895, p. 9: 'hadde her Jan alle deser vergaderinghen liever ledich gheweest' and 'ghevoelde dat her Vranc begherde die minne gods te vermeeren in vele personen'. On Hinckaert, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 132–33 (De Leu 1885, pp. 279–80). For Brother Gerard and Pomerius on Ruusbroec's obedience to Coudenberg, see De Vreese 1895, p. 14 and Verdeyen 1981b, p. 155 (De Leu 1885, p. 299).

Coudenberg – who made the plans, took the decisions and imposed his will – was as strong as he was strict. In the Groenendaal *obituarium* the archivist Sayman van Wijc heaped praise on Coudenberg, but in other sources he described his leadership as rather harsh. Still, Ruusbroec did not hesitate to admonish monastic administrators who let themselves be carried away by the power and trappings of office:

One should not aspire to dominate,
nor attempt to guide, nor laws dictate.
For arrogance is lurking unawares
in persons zealous of mundane affairs.

*Ghi en sult niet willen domineeren,
ander menschen berechten ende regeren.
Want hoverde es in hem verburgen
die begheren te draghen vrende sorghen.*²³

These lines of verse were taken from the *Beguines*, but Ruusbroec had issued a warning as early as the *Tabernacle*. Some prelates, he said, felt superior to their confrères, and acted as though their positions were their rightful inheritance rather than an honourable appointment. They lost themselves completely in the exercise of power and left ‘the souls and religious life to the prior’.²⁴

Was the mystic expressing general criticism here, or did he think that his own provost viewed Groenendaal’s primary purpose – to serve as a centre of worship – too exclusively as the duty of the prior? Apparently Ruusbroec was not entirely happy with his appointment. The later Brabant chronicle *De laude Brabantiae* (*In Praise of Brabant*) states that Ruusbroec perceived his duties as an obstacle to his contemplative exercises.

Their differing responsibilities meant that Ruusbroec and Coudenberg did not always think along the same lines, but it must also have been a difference in character that caused one to be drawn to the ideal and the other to practical matters. The combination of their divergent personalities was in fact the key to Groenendaal’s success. To give permanence to a religious community, ideals were not enough: initiatives needed a strong institutional foundation. Ultimately it was an extremely felicitous division of labour: the enterprising Coudenberg as managing

²³ *Beguines* 2b/1021–23.

²⁴ *Tabernacle* 5:6056–58: ‘ende bevelen de sielen ende de religie den prior’. Sayman on Coudenberg: ‘for he was hard enough on his confrères, in as far as he was able to be’ (*want hij was den conventuael bruederen haert ghenoech, alsoe ver als hi vermochte*) (Dykmans 1940, pp. 213–14, n. 1).

director and the inspired prior who assumed responsibility for religious duties and ensured a high level of spirituality.²⁵

2. Priests in the Forest

Ruusbroec closes *On the Four Temptations* with a short examination of the changes experienced by people in middle age. Before the age of forty, he observes, they are fickle by nature and inclined, even as regards their spiritual practice, to let themselves be carried away by a desire for ‘pleasure, taste and gratification’. Then, however, the mind begins to mature, until by the age of fifty one has become a balanced personality. Ruusbroec refers to the parallel that the Church Father Gregory the Great saw in the life of the Old Testament priests, who served in the temple until they were fifty ‘and only then did they become guardians of the tabernacle, for nature had cooled down in them’. Thus it is written in Leviticus, the book of the Bible in which Ruusbroec also read that the people of Israel customarily celebrated each fiftieth year by freeing all the slaves and prisoners. In that special year, ‘which is called jubilee in Hebrew’, the earth was allowed to rest and everyone was given the possibility to return to the land of his forefathers. In Ruusbroec’s day this idea of redemption took on a new meaning through the papal establishment of the Holy Years, during which one could obtain plenary remission of all one’s sins at various places in Rome. Starting in 1300, every fifty years countless pilgrims made their way to Rome to acquire indulgences. Ruusbroec saw in ‘our holy pilgrimage to Rome’ mainly the absolution from sin that freed the souls of the chastened fifty-year-olds, ‘and in this way we become true guardians of God’s tabernacle’.²⁶

Even though Ruusbroec gives free rein to his sense of metaphor at the close of the *Temptations*, no other passage in his work has been so persistently subjected to biographical interpretation. When the mystic wrote these lines, he was due to celebrate a double jubilee. In 1343 –

²⁵ See Milis 1979 regarding the rather predictable developments in religious institutions such as Groenendaal. Cf. Constable 1996, pp. 1–43, esp. pp. 42–43. See Ampe 1981a, pp. 172 and 179 on *De laude Brabantiae*.

²⁶ *Temptations* 297–349. For various interpretations of this passage, see Lievens 1983, with a list of the older literature; Noë 1985; Warnar 1993c, p. 27; Mertens 1997, pp. 126–27. See also the introduction to the textual commentary in the edition of the *Temptations*.

approximately the period in which the *Temptations* was written – the author celebrated his fiftieth birthday, and could conclude from his own experience that at that age one was no longer ‘fickle in his nature’.²⁷ Moreover, the fifty-year-old Ruusbroec had completed his years of service at the collegiate church, and the same year saw the founding of Groenendaal, thanks to the licence granted by Duke Jan III. Thus Ruusbroec’s mention of the ‘pilgrimage to Rome’ also alluded to his impending move to the Zonien Forest. On the eve of his departure for the new chapel of Groenendaal, the service of which had been entrusted to him and his friends, Ruusbroec could rightly call himself the guardian of a tabernacle.

In the *Temptations* Ruusbroec made only this casual reference to reality, but he had been deeply affected by the analogy between tabernacle and chapel. In Groenendaal he embarked on his greatest treatise: *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, an exegetical commentary on the chapters of Exodus that treat the construction and organisation of the Old Testament edifice that the Israelites had built at God’s command after their exodus from Egypt. In contrast to the biographical interpretation of the *Temptations*, the *Tabernacle* has not yet been examined against the backdrop of Ruusbroec’s life, although the biblical building of a tabernacle must have been a symbol that appealed greatly to the dissident priests. For had they not turned their backs on the riches of St Gudula’s in the same way that the Israelites had left behind the fleshpots of Egypt?²⁸

Ruusbroec was undoubtedly taken with the idea that in becoming a priest of the chapel in the Zonien Forest he had also become the guardian of a tabernacle. However, we cannot explain his fascination for the biblical edifice simply by linking his life and work. For an author of Ruusbroec’s calibre, an allegorical interpretation of reality was merely the starting point for an exploration of the deeper meanings of scripture. Nevertheless, nearly every chapter of the *Tabernacle* reveals the extent to which Ruusbroec’s new life in Groenendaal affected his writing. Approximately halfway through, he calls a temporary halt to the exposition of the tabernacle to embark on a lengthy digression concerning a higher interpretation of the attributes, rituals and duties of the priests of the tabernacle. To this end, he shifts his attention from Exodus to Leviticus, where all these things are catalogued. Within the medieval practice of biblical commentary, which generally treated one

²⁷ *Temptations* 299: ‘onghestadich inder natueren’.

²⁸ On the allegorical interpretation of the tabernacle and the church building, see Faupel-Dreves 2000, pp. 215–23.

book at a time, this was a curious departure from tradition. It seems as though a piece of writing originally conceived as an independent text was inserted into the running commentary, but even if the Leviticus exegesis is no more than an interlude that spun out of control, this does not diminish Ruusbroec's sudden passion for the priesthood, which coincided with his move to Groenendaal.²⁹

The Tabernacle contains Ruusbroec's spiritual statute for the new Groenendaal community. We caught an earlier glimpse of it in the *Temptations*, where Ruusbroec's short digression on the guardians of the tabernacle showed that his interest in Leviticus had already been aroused. According to what was then the standard interpretation of Leviticus, the priests in the tabernacle were the models for their later confrères in the Church. That idea prompted Ruusbroec to seek a higher meaning in the vestments, holy orders and activities of the priests, which led to extensive observations on matters that may strike modern readers as downright tedious. For instance, a long exposition – running to more than eight hundred lines in the new critical edition – treats not just the vestments but also the decorations and ornaments worn by the high priest Aaron: the red tunic of evangelical truth, the sleeveless chasuble of unity of spirit and the celestial blue mitre of orientation towards God. Ruusbroec even notices the colours and weave of the high priest's girdle: woven into the linen of a clear conscience is the blue of 'heavenly intention', the purple of the 'abstinence in all things that are not allowed' and the scarlet of the determination to serve God and all people, edged with a flower motif that represents the good example in word and deed.³⁰

The unravelling of Aaron's girdle is typical of Ruusbroec's meticulous treatment of a biblical text. In each chapter of the *Tabernacle* he demonstrates staggering skills in exegesis, but the sections on the priests are unsurpassed. One daring *tour de force* is Ruusbroec's discussion of the so-called *rationale*, the decorated 'breastplate' of the high priest. According to Peter Comestor's *Historia scolastica* – a well-known handbook for Bible study and one of the main sources for the *Tabernacle* – twelve different precious stones were mounted on the *rationale*, each

²⁹ This is treated in more detail in the introduction to the critical edition of the *Tabernacle*.

³⁰ See *Tabernacle* 5:937–45 regarding the girdle; the entire interpretation of priestly vestments spans 5:922–1795. Of great influence was the commentary on Leviticus by the Norbertine Raoul Flaix, written around 1157 but still in use long afterwards, also at the universities. See Smalley 1968.

containing the name of one of the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel (the twelve sons of Jacob). Ruusbroec connected them with the ancestors of the twelve apostles, each of which was bound up in turn with one of the articles of faith. These were the points of departure for a chapter in which Ruusbroec linked the meaning of the individual articles of faith to the qualities of Jesus, worthy of imitation, which in turn corresponded to the particular colours and powers of the jewels of the *rationale*. Thus arises a miraculous interplay of exegesis and stone magic. In the topaz's unique wealth of colours Ruusbroec recognises Christ's all-surpassing 'nobility and adornment' (*edelheit ende cierheit*). The beauty of the cut emerald is a feast for the eyes: just as this stone reflects all things, the life of Jesus on earth was all-encompassing. The brown colour of the agate (*achates*) symbolises humility and uprightness, virtues that make one lovable in the eyes of one's fellow human beings; so, too, it is said that those who wear agates are well-loved and gracious.

At such moments the *Tabernacle* recalls the encyclopaedic symbolism of the *Realm*. Ruusbroec had gathered his information from very different sources. The *Historia scolastica* was particularly rich in minute details of biblical history, but Ruusbroec combined information from this textbook with both the catechetical doctrine of the apostles as the bearers of the articles of faith and the knowledge of stones he must have acquired from scientific literature.³¹

Ruusbroec's sources will be dealt with later. First, we must focus on the jewels of the Creed, in an attempt to discern the background of Ruusbroec's hermeneutics. The symbolic meaning of the *rationale* was discussed almost exclusively in treatises on the liturgy, where this priestly ornament was linked to the duties of the ordained clergy by means of the exegetical formula of typology, according to which events taking place in the New Testament are interpreted as the fulfilment of episodes recounted in the Old Testament. The acts performed by the high priest Aaron and his sons in the tabernacle were seen as an Old Testament prefiguration of the priestly office fulfilled in the New Testament by Christ himself. Ruusbroec proceeded according to the same typological strategy. His aim in examining the duties of the tabernacle priests is to ascertain what their later confrères should be required to learn:

³¹ See *Tabernacle* 5:1066–1596. An attempt to identify the source of this passage can be found in Bastings 1995, with a summary of the older literature. Cf. also Meier 1977, pp. 341–42. For the *Historia scolastica*, see the edition in *PL* 198, col. 1184. For the connection between the Creed and the apostles, see Tinbergen 1900, pp. 227–30.

And in order that we might be taught what is rightly fitting for every priest who wants to be pure and live honorably for God and usefully for all people, we must note in detail the way in which Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons according to God's command. And we must also go on to note the manner of the sacrifices by which they were cleansed and sanctified, [and] how they performed them, for these things prefigured how we should be clean and holy according to the dearest will of God.³²

The analysis of Aaron's attire was only the beginning. Ruusbroec treats various garments and acts of this Old Testament priest as prefigurations of the virtues and qualities required of ordained clergy. Unique in Middle Dutch literature is Ruusbroec's penetrating examination of the chapters of Leviticus which describe the sacrificial animals brought by the priests to the tabernacle. First of all, a calf: 'In this we are taught that all those who now become priests in the Christian law are bound to offer their body to God in a hard life of penitence.' According to the letter of the Old Testament, the priests had to burn separately the calf's fat and the membrane surrounding its liver, as well as its kidneys. These surplus organs stand for the desires one must sacrifice on the altar of abstinence. The biology books of Ruusbroec's day had taught him that the kidneys are 'a place and a food of all unchastity', from which the mystic deduced, as a moral implication, that each priest was obliged 'to disdain all manner of unchastity and all the pleasure that might come to him from it'.³³

The account of the calf is characteristic of Ruusbroec's exegesis of sacrificial animals, which we need not recount in full to show how preoccupied he was with the duties of priesthood. That Ruusbroec undertook a profound study of Leviticus says enough, and the mere fact of it sets him apart in Middle Dutch literature. Jacob van Maerlant,

³² *Tabernacle* 5:2933–40: 'Ende hier omme, op dat wi gheleert werden wat ieghewelken priesteren sunderlinghe van rechte toe behoert die reine sal sijn ende gode eerlec leven ende allen menschen orborlec, soe mote wi merken met onderscede die maniere hoe Moyses Aaronne ende sine sonen consacreerde na den ghebode goods. Ende wi moten oec voerwert merken die maniere der sacrificien, hoe sise daden, daer si mede ghereinecht worden ende gheheilecht, want dese dinghe waren ene figure hoe wi reine soudn sijn ende heilech na den liefsten wille goods.' For the liturgical literature in which the *rationale* is discussed, see Faupel-Dreves 2000, esp. pp. 145–46 and 334–39.

³³ Quotations *Tabernacle* 5:2991–96 ('Hier inne werden wi gheleert dat alle dieghene die nu priesteren werden in kerstenre wet, si sijn sculdich haren lichame Gode te offerne in een hart leven van penitencien') and 5:3085–91 ('ene stat ende een voetsel al oncuuscheit... te versmadene alle manieren van oncuuscheiden ende alle ghenoechte die hem daerave comen mochte'). What Ruusbroec says about the liver and kidneys tallies with the information on these organs in the anatomical treatise *Van smeinscen lede* (*On the Human Body*); see verses 1191–94 and 1228 ff. (Elaut 1956).

who based his *Rijmbijbel* (*Rhyming Bible*) on the *Historia scolastica*, whittled Leviticus down to a mere seven lines of verse, for his lay audience had no need of a biblical book on priests. But whereas Maerlant had given short shrift to the guardians of the tabernacle, Ruusbroec's discussion of them took up half of his longest work.³⁴

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Much of the exegesis in the Tabernacle results in rather abstract pieces of advice, counselling readers to adopt the mentality needed to lift the human mind to a higher form of divine contemplation. Yet Ruusbroec repeatedly gives a concrete view of the position of the priest. He takes great pains, for example, to examine a pericope from Leviticus (21:18), which states that not all the descendants of Aaron may become priests, those excluded being the blind, the lame, hunchbacks, lepers, those with hooked or crooked noses, and others with blemished countenances. In Ruusbroec's day it was still thought that people with bodily defects were less suited to divine worship. In the *Tabernacle*, however, flawed biblical priests mainly occasioned criticism of the cardinal sins that disqualified clerics from priestly office.³⁵

The blind stand for untrained, ignorant and haughty priests. The lame represent the greedy who seek to serve both God and the world. The hunchbacks embody the misers who cannot part from their riches because their goods have grown to be part of them, just as their veins and sinews have 'shrunk' (*vercrompen*) around their humps. The lepers among the priests could blame their blemished appearance on gluttony and lust, which disfigures a person's spiritual visage. Here Ruusbroec emerges as a moralist in the best tradition of the medieval sermon. He even looked thoroughly into the dangers of licentious behaviour. As reluctant as Ruusbroec generally was to base his argument on authorities, here he cites in the space of only a few pages the standard quotations from Sts Paul, Augustine and Gregory that appear in all the catechetical handbooks. Despite his excursion into the manuals of virtues and vices, Ruusbroec stays his course. Even the subject of succumbing to the lusts of the flesh is regarded entirely from the perspective of the priesthood:

³⁴ Leviticus in the *Rijmbijbel*, verses 5212–18 (Gysseling 1980–87, vol. III; see Berendrecht 1996, p. 94).

³⁵ Examples of abstract exegesis in the *Tabernacle* 5:3497–3504, 3543–46, 3563–65, 3703–06, 3772–3832, 3874–3977. See *Tabernacle* 5:2516–2944 for the entire discussion of physical defects. Cf. Marchal 1999–2000, vol. 2, p. 10, on the physical aberrations of the clergy.

‘And therefore, as long as a person is unchaste and gluttonous, he is unworthy of becoming a priest. For he disdains the service of our Lord, and serves his unclean flesh in impurity.’³⁶

As soon as Ruusbroec turns his attention to the morals of the Church’s servants, the reader of the *Tabernacle* is confronted with impassioned prose:

Oh, what shamefulness before God and before the whole world, for the holiness which Christ and the first priests founded by their holy life and by their blood, the wicked priests now living destroy by their shameful sins. For they are as a shame and an opprobrium in the world. And just as in the beginning of the Holy Church the shadow of St Peter made whole all the sick who approached it, so now the air stinks from the sins and from the ill-repute of the unclean priests now living. And from the stinking air of ill-repute many people become sick in soul, and some die in mortal sin.³⁷

Such strong language appears often in the *Tabernacle*, but this does not mean that Ruusbroec intended to clean the Church’s Augean stables – or even those of the Chapter of St Gudula. All the excitement about the shocking practices of the ‘bad clerics’ (*quaden papen*) is, in the end, only a pause in Ruusbroec’s Leviticus exegesis, intended as a manifesto for the ordained clergy. He writes animatedly about the eternal value of priesthood, which is honoured above ‘all the states in heaven and earth’, for the priest is the only one who has the authority to administer the sacraments. Even a person whose pious life rivals that of John the Baptist – after the Virgin Mary, the second patron saint of Groenendaal – is not entitled, if he is not an ordained priest, to consecrate the body of the Lord, or to touch the host or offer it to worshippers. Neither is he qualified to absolve people from their sins, nor to administer the sacraments of confirmation and extreme unction. The special position of the priest, however, derives above all from his unique role in the

³⁶ *Tabernacle* 5:2803–04: ‘Ende hier omme, alsoe langhe als die mensche oncuusch ende gulsech es, soe en es hi niet werdech priester te werdene want hi versmaedt den dienst ons heren ende dient sinen onreinen vleesche in onsuverheiden.’ Quotations from the Church Fathers and catechetical handbooks: *Tabernacle* 5:2732–53 and 2784–2801. Cf. Warnar 1995a, pp. 77–86.

³⁷ *Tabernacle* 5:4896–4904: ‘O wi der scanden vore gode ende vore alle die werelt! Want die heilicheit die Christus ende die ierste priestere stichtten met haren levne ende met haren bloede, die destrueren die quade priestere die nu sijn met haren scandeleden sonden. Want si sijn alsoe een confusie ende I lachter in die werelt. Ende alsoe als in den beginne der heilegher kerken die scadue sente Peters ghesont maecte alle die sieke die hare toe quamen, alsoe stinct nu die locht van den sonden ende van der quaden famen der onreine priestere die nu sijn. Ende van der stinkender locht der quader famen werden vele menschen siec ane der sielen, ende selke sterven in doetsonden.’

Eucharist. At the Last Supper, Christ – the first priest – had given his body, and the repetition of this high point in redemptive history was entrusted to the ordained clergy, ‘who are anointed and ordained to His honor, and no one else may do it’.³⁸

‘No one else may do it.’ Ruusbroec’s song of praise cannot conceal the gist of the matter, to be found in the last sentence about a priest’s inalienable rights. Here the mystic takes a firm stand for his confrères: ‘And no one can practise the office of a priest but those who are ordered to it by God and by the Holy Church.’ The polemical nature of these statements stands out against the background of a protracted conflict between the secular clergy and the mendicant orders. The former defended the viewpoint that the administration of the sacraments was originally and immutably entrusted to the bishops and the priests alone. They were the successors of Jesus’ twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples whom He Himself had ordained. In the eyes of the ordained clergy, the biblical foundation of the priesthood was not open to discussion. The mendicant orders, by contrast, argued that the Pope, by sanctioning their new movement, had granted them the same right to administer the sacraments. The conflict led to vehement debates which expanded to include many other issues, among them the true observance of the apostolic principles. The secular clergy defended their community of property, whereas the mendicant orders followed the example of Jesus’ poverty.³⁹

Both the situation in Groenendaal and Ruusbroec’s past as a chaplain explain why he sided with the secular clergy. The priest was the true guardian of Christ’s testament. Ruusbroec defended this position with the traditional arguments: ‘For we find that Christ consecrated twelve bishops from His apostles, and all the other seventy-two disciples He made priests.’⁴⁰ But Ruusbroec did not stop at voicing the usual secular standpoint: he proves himself a party stalwart, directing fierce criticism

³⁸ Quotations from *Tabernacle* 5:5373–74 (‘alle die state die in hemel ochte in eerde sijn’), 5261–68 and 5240–41 (‘die te sijnre eeren ghesalfte ende ghewijt sijn, ende niemen anders en maecht doen’).

³⁹ Quotation *Tabernacle* 5:5283–84: ‘Ende priesters ambacht en mach niemen pleghen dan die daertoe gheordent sijn van gode ende van der heilegher kerken’; see also 5:5186–92. For background information, see Scase 1989 and Lawrence 1994, pp. 161–65.

⁴⁰ *Tabernacle* 5:2336–37: ‘Want wi vinden dat Christus consacreerde XII bisscope van sinen apostelen ende die andere LXII jongheren maecte hi alle priestere.’ See *Tabernacle* 5:2108–2353 for Ruusbroec’s discussion of the secular clergy as the true descendants of Christ.

at the mendicant orders. The secular clergy condemned the mendicant friars as frauds who, at the first available opportunity, betrayed their ideals of poverty and asceticism. Energetically adopting this negative image in the *Tabernacle*, Ruusbroec sketches a sarcastic picture of the Franciscans' practices, imputing them with visiting their female confessees to wheedle money out of them, tramping as beggars through towns and villages, and singing masses at the top of their voices, both to please people and to extort donations. That they preached beliefs they did not adhere to themselves was obvious from their behavior; for in their convents the rich friars ate their fill at well-spread tables.⁴¹

Ruusbroec sneered at the eating habits of the Friars Minor in a section of the *Tabernacle* to which Brother Gerard took exception. The good Carthusian thought he had reason to omit the 'immoderate scolding' (*grote besceldenisse*) of nearly all branches of the Church in his copy of the *Tabernacle*. He was convinced that Ruusbroec's criticism was prompted by genuine concern, but apparently Brother Gerard considered such reading matter seditious enough as it was. No other scribe seems to have followed in his timorous footsteps. At any rate, no copy of the *Tabernacle* has yet been discovered which bears traces of his deletions, whereas Ruusbroec's 'scolding' does occur separately – even in a book that begins and ends with fragments of the Rule of the Carthusians. In modern anthologies and essays one even detects a certain fascination for these attacks on the clergy, considered a lively intermezzo in the often long-winded *Tabernacle*: for a moment the high degree of abstraction of Ruusbroec's contemplative theology makes way for matters so concrete they seem to have been taken from real life. 'By means of such criticism, Ruusbroec seeks to contribute to the elevation of monastic life and the reformation of ecclesiastical discipline', wrote Van Mierlo. But it was not as innocent as that. The 'scolding' says much about the scolder. By opposing abuses in Church and cloister, Ruusbroec sought to legitimise the new community of priests in the Zonien Forest. That was a generally acknowledged propagandistic effect of polemics. The tirade in the *Tabernacle* was bent on emphasising that the true guardians of the tabernacle were to be found in Groenendaal.⁴²

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⁴¹ *Tabernacle* 5:6114–75. See Warnar 2002a, pp. 43–44.

⁴² Brother Gerard quotation in De Vreese 1895, p. 16; quotation Van Mierlo 1950,

Ruusbroec was not the first to discover a higher symbolism in the architecture of the tabernacle, but for him and his followers at the new chapel of Groenendaal the allegorical arrangement did have a special meaning. The inner circle of Ruusbroec's disciples could recognise their own situation in the text. This increased its appeal, stimulated reflection on its contents, and fostered an atmosphere of fellowship. Ruusbroec was not insensitive to that application of the allegory. Within the context of Groenendaal, the metaphor (*figure*) of the tabernacle was an extremely inspiring frame of reference for spiritual thought. The associations with the new chapel appealed to the imagination of the priests in the forest; moreover, they could derive a religious identity from the comparison with their Old Testament predecessors.⁴³

Developing his own imagery and idiom to describe the mystical life to which servants of the Church should aspire, Ruusbroec made his *Tabernacle* attractive to clerics like the priest Hendrik Stevens from the Dutch city of Brielle, who in 1479 made a complete copy of Ruusbroec's text, and Bartholomaeus Moens, the custodian of the Brussels Church of St Nicholas, in whose estate a parchment copy of the *Liber de spirituali tabernaculo* was found in 1483. The frequent use of the first person plural (an idiosyncrasy of the *Tabernacle* that deserves a separate study) suggests that the mystic's primary audience was his own circle: the clerics, for example, who followed the three pioneers to Groenendaal. Men such as Walter van Heyst, Hendrik Bondewijn, Johannes Fracijs, Willem Jordaens and Johannes Stoever, who are recorded in the Groenendaal *obituarium* as having taken holy orders, were learned enough to understand the methods and techniques of exegetical commentary. Moreover, Ruusbroec's model for the mystical life of priests must have appealed to these ordained clerics.⁴⁴

The *Tabernacle* soon reached such readers. In 1383 Geert Grote discussed making copies of the text with the Dutch priests Johannes vanden Gronde and Gijsbert Dou, clerics who had stood alongside Geert Grote

p. 61; for 'scolding' (*besceldenisse*) in Carthusian manuscripts, see De Vreese 1900–02, MS. Kk.

⁴³ On the function of allegory, see Warnar 1995a, pp. 109–22, and the list of literature. In connection with tabernacle allegories, see Chenu 1976, pp. 192–96 and De Lubac 1979, vol. II¹, pp. 403–18. On religious identity and shared literature, see Stock 1983, pp. 88–240, with a summary on pp. 88–92.

⁴⁴ See Dykmans 1940 (via the index) for the Groenendaal brothers mentioned. See Kruitwagen 1913, p. 92 and Derolez 1966–2001, vol. IV, p. 147, for mention of Hendrik Stevens and Bartholomaeus Moens.

at the cradle of the *Devotio Moderna*. The three of them held the same ideas about the *vita apostolica* that we find in the *Tabernacle*; they lived, moreover, in a community of priests comparable to the small company comprising the Hinckaert household. The *Tabernacle* was soon available to Ruusbroec's followers in Brussels as well: the oldest book containing the text (regarded by specialists as the oldest surviving Ruusbroec manuscript) comes from Rooklooster, the Augustinian priory – founded by the Brussels chaplain Willem Daneels – located in the Zonien Forest and closely connected with Groenendaal.⁴⁵

The larger the readership of the *Tabernacle* became, the less attention was paid to Ruusbroec's preoccupation with the priesthood. Among Geert Grote's circle of acquaintances was Hendrik Mande, who adapted large parts of the *Tabernacle* for incorporation into his *Spiegel der waerheit* (*Mirror of Truth*). Mande was not a priest, but as a *redditus* – a person who had not taken holy orders but was allowed to participate in Divine Office – he perhaps felt most drawn to the passages in the *Tabernacle* that treat the edifice itself and the décor of divine worship. Mande's writings suggest that he took much less interest in Ruusbroec's chapters on the priesthood.⁴⁶

One did not, after all, have to be a servant of the Church to appreciate the *Tabernacle*. According to Brother Gerard, everyone – from pope to parishioner – could find something of interest in Ruusbroec's text. In the meantime, the truth of that statement has been borne out by the text's survival in more than forty manuscripts, even though most of them date from the second half of the fifteenth century, by which time the *Tabernacle* was travelling around the entire Dutch-speaking region on the passport of a famous author. The dissemination of the *Tabernacle* was limited to the Low Countries, however, in contrast to the *Espousals* and the *Stone*, which penetrated the world of scholarship in Latin translations and, in a German edition, even reached kindred

⁴⁵ Regarding Geert Grote's letter on the *Tabernacle*, see Mulder 1933, p. 204. On Johannes vanden Gronde and Gijsbert Dou, see Epiney-Burgard 1970, p. 75, n. 148 and pp. 45–46; Van der Wansem 1958 (via the index). Remarkable indeed is a fourteenth-century paper manuscript of the *Tabernacle* that belonged to Jacob de Vos and his wife before coming into the possession of their son, the priest Anthonijs de Vos (Bouwman & Warnar 1994, pp. 317–19 and Warnar 1999a, p. 382 and n. 53, with list of literature). On the old *Tabernacle* manuscript, see Kienhorst & Kors 1998a, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ On the *Spiegel der waerheit*, see Wyers & Heuvelman 1984, edition in Mertens 1984. Regarding Mande's biography and early contact with Geert Grote, see Mertens 1986, pp. 19–21.

spirits as far away as the Alps. Only a single excerpt has been preserved of Willem Jordaens's Latin translation of the *Tabernacle*, but fragments and isolated phrases of the Middle Dutch text have survived as glosses in manuscripts containing Latin texts, which nevertheless suggests a modicum of interest in intellectual circles.⁴⁷

No one, however, was as deeply affected by the *Tabernacle* as Brother Gerard, who took pains to supplement Ruusbroec's already ample information on the shrine with all kinds of 'opinions of other scholars on the outward appearance of the tabernacle' (*opinioene van anderen lereren op die uutwendighe figure des tabernakels*). In various manuscripts we can still read the glosses Brother Gerard added: supplemental pieces of information on building materials, weights, measurements, the little bells decorating the robe of the high priest and other details of his vestments. The Carthusian was not easily satisfied. Where Ruusbroec described the covering of the tabernacle as consisting of eleven hair-cloth sheets, the last of which is folded double and draped over the building from front to back, Brother Gerard explained – on the basis of older sources – how the curtains were folded and draped between the rafters in such a way as to keep out all wind and rain.⁴⁸

Some of the notes are so fussy as to smack of pedantry, but it was not Brother Gerard's intention to detract from Ruusbroec's work. He hoped only that his glosses would contribute to the usefulness of the text, so that 'a subtle and enlightened reader could meditate profitably on it' (*een subtijl ende verlicht lesere yet orberlics daer uut moghe mediteren*). His wish came true: while Willem Jordaens's Latin translation of the *Tabernacle* is practically untraceable, manuscripts containing Brother Gerard's glosses represent approximately half of the surviving Middle Dutch copies of the text. In this branch of the text's history the *Tabernacle* evolved into a new, glossed version with all the hallmarks of a commentary and even with a new title. Ruusbroec's work, which in the Groenendaal manuscript was still described rather neutrally as 'the book of the spiritual tabernacle' (*dat boec vanden gheesteliken tabernacule*), was pointedly trumpeted in Brother Gerard's edition as an exegetical

⁴⁷ An overview of the surviving copies of the *Tabernacle* is included in the introduction to the critical edition. For the extant Latin translations of the *Tabernacle*, see Troelstra 1903, p. 190, n. 2 and De Baere 1996b. For glosses from the *Tabernacle* in Latin manuscripts, see Achten 1984, p. 225 and Kooper 2000.

⁴⁸ See the older edition of the *Tabernacle* (Ruusbroec, *Werken*, 1944–48, vol. II, p. 60, n. 1).

genre piece: ‘the exposition of the tabernacle of the covenant and that which belongs to it’ (*die expositie vanden tabernacule des orconscaps ende van datter toebehoert*).⁴⁹

3. The Exposition of the Tabernacle

The so-called Tiel chronicle, concluded around 1455, must be the oldest historiographical work to mention Ruusbroec without reference to the Groenendaal sources: ‘Brother Jan van Ruusbroec of the order of canons regular was very active in Groenendaal in 1380; he was a very pious man and someone who could explain Holy Scripture in a very agreeable and competent way in the mother tongue.’ The year cannot be accurate – by 1380 the elderly Ruusbroec had laid down his pen for good – but the characterisation of the mystic as a Middle Dutch exegete shows that the unknown chronicler was a competent judge. Not only did Ruusbroec consider Holy Scripture to be the source of all his wisdom, but in writing *On the Spiritual Tabernacle* he had succeeded in producing the first biblical commentary originally written in Middle Dutch.⁵⁰

Although a pioneer in his mother tongue, Ruusbroec was a latecomer to a field that many medieval masters of the *sacra pagina* had already explored exhaustively. The Bible was the most important book in the Middle Ages; the study of scripture extended in time and space from the Church Fathers to the cathedral schools and from provincial cloisters to the theological faculties of Paris. Ingenious methods and sophisticated techniques of exegesis were developed to unlock the deeper secrets of God’s word. The fruits of previous study were stored in monumental reference works, crowned by the *Glossa ordinaria*, each page of which

⁴⁹ See De Vreese 1900–02, p. 20. The replacement of the original title with Brother Gerard’s title is immediately noticeable in a manuscript containing all the works of Ruusbroec, which was copied directly from the Groenendaal manuscript. After completion of the new manuscript, another scribe copied Brother Gerard’s prologue into the front of it, wrote his glosses in the margin of the *Tabernacle* text, and altered the original colophon, ‘This is the book of the spiritual tabernacle’ (*Dit es dat boec vanden ghesteliken tabernakel*), to ‘Here ends the exposition of the book of the spiritual tabernacle’ (*Hier eyndet die expositie des boecs vanden ghesteliken tabernakel*) (De Vreese 1900–02, p. 58). Quotation of Brother Gerard in De Vreese 1895, p. 15.

⁵⁰ For the *Tielse kroniek*, see Kuys 1983, p. 129. For what are perhaps earlier examples of Middle Dutch exegesis, see Hap 1975 (rhymed commentary on the Song of Songs) and Blommaert 1838–51, vol. 3, pp. 131–42 (*Sint Jans evangelie* by Augustynken). Their verse form makes both texts difficult to judge by the formal criteria of biblical commentary.

contained biblical texts surrounded by commentary gleaned from older writings.⁵¹

Until the twelfth century, theology and exegesis were in fact the same thing, but advances in understanding eventually led to fundamental changes in all branches of scholarship. The rise of logic, with its systematic *summae* and *maxims*, put theology in a new light, but this did not mean that the exegetical evolution had come to an end. The ideas of quite a few masters of scholasticism have survived only in biblical commentaries. This was the result of the usual method of teaching, for the theological instruction given by lectors and masters consisted in lecturing on individual books of the Bible.⁵²

Modern libraries still contain countless manuscripts filled with many unstudied glosses, notes, expositions and commentaries on the 'book of books'. Their number alone gives some idea of the wealth stored in the treasuries of biblical scholarship. The 1309 catalogue of the library of the Cistercian monastery of Villers in Brabant places the first 109 volumes (of a total of 455) in the category of biblical commentary. The *Postilla in totam Bibliam*, which the Franciscan scholar Nicholas of Lyra produced between 1322 and 1331, is preserved in more than one thousand codices, but the separate parts of this undisputed bestseller represent only 94 of the more than 11,500 numbers comprising the eleven-volume *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*. In this monumental overview, *On the Spiritual Tabernacle* appears under number 4921.⁵³

The simple fact that Ruusbroec was given a place among the masters of biblical study is a welcome antidote to the disdain with which the *Tabernacle* – 'this never-ending book' – still has to contend. It cannot be denied that Ruusbroec's endless allegorising is difficult for the modern reader to digest, yet the book remains quite a feat. The *Tabernacle* was the first Middle Dutch contribution to a specialist genre, and deserves to be called what it was in the eyes of Ruusbroec's contemporaries: his *magnum opus*.

The text immediately compelled respect. The ten manuscripts and fragments dating from before or around 1400 give the *Tabernacle* pride of place in the early tradition of Ruusbroec's works. For contemporaries,

⁵¹ A classic work on medieval Bible study is Smalley 1952; see also De Lubac 1979, as well as various contributions in Riché & Lubrichon 1984 and Dahan 1999. On the *Glossa ordinaria*, see Gibson 1991; regarding glossed Bibles, see De Hamel 1984.

⁵² Verger 1994.

⁵³ For the *Repertorium*, see Stegmüller 1950–80. Villers's catalogue was edited in Derolez 1966–2001, vol. IV, pp. 212–26. See Ruh 1987 on Nicholas of Lyra.

the text's appeal consisted in the ingenious interplay of biblical sources and their metaphorical interpretation. This procedure may not kindle enthusiasm in present-day readers, but learned clerics like Brother Gerard were deeply impressed by the resourcefulness with which Ruusbroec thought up new meanings: 'for many subtle spiritual truths have been drawn from the most intricate things which appear throughout the Bible and which have been gathered together into one, that is, into the human soul, just as the tabernacle, and all that belongs to it, was a single work'.⁵⁴

Brother Gerard recognised Ruusbroec as a superior architect who had erected the building of spiritual existence as a symbolic shrine. The mystic began in the forecourt of moral life, which is surrounded by the columns of orthodoxy, to which was attached the curtain of 'purity of morals' (*suwerheit van seden*), painted in the colours of the four virtues of discretion, fortitude, compassion and 'unfeigned innocence' (*ongeveinsde onnoeselheit*). Ruusbroec utilised beams, curtains, walls and tent-pegs to make a solid structure built of commandments, virtues and devout qualities. Even the raw materials did not escape his notice. Deep red coccine – used to dye the various curtains and roof-coverings of the tabernacle – is obtained from the blood of tiny insects who live on leaves in the desert. Ruusbroec saw in these 'humble little worms' (*cleine oetmoedige woermkene*) proof that pious souls must shun the world and live 'in the desert beyond all creatures. And there we are to feed on gracious green foliage, that is, on heavenly exercises'.⁵⁵

Ruusbroec kept his metaphoric machinery going in a treatise that alone comprises one-quarter of his complete oeuvre. Anyone who fully appreciates the creativity, stamina, concentration and inspiration this

⁵⁴ The Brother Gerard quotation is in De Vreese 1895, p. 15: 'want daer is menigherhande gheestelike subtile waerheit ghetrocken uten intricaesten dinghen die in alle der bibelen legghen ende die al vergadert comende in een – dat is in des menschen siele, ghelijc dat dat tabernakel met al dien dat hem toebehoirde een werc was'. The *Tabernacle* is described as 'this never-ending book' ('dit overloze boek') in Westerlinck 1981, pp. 484–85, in a well-balanced discussion of the text. Cf. Cranenburgh 1992, p. 8, on the *Tabernacle*: 'unappealing to modern readers as spiritual reading' (by way of introduction to an entire book on the text!). For the fourteenth-century *Tabernacle* manuscripts, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 34, 42, 49, 50 and 75 (the same excerpts appear in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds néerlandais 32, c. 1400; cf. Lievens 1957b). See also Bouwman & Warnar 1994, pp. 317–18; Kienhorst & Mulder 1993, no. 4; Lievens 1963, no. 36.

⁵⁵ *Tabernacle* 4:569–70: 'in der woestinen boven alle creaturen. Ende daer sele wi ons spise nemen in graciosen grunen loveren, dat es in hemelscer ufeningen.'

required of the author must feel some respect for the well-nigh impossible task he had set himself.

The contours of a religious psychology were lent mystical depth when Ruusbroec proceeded to discuss the inner structure of the tabernacle. After taking the reader on a comprehensive tour of the edifice, he finally arrived in the *sanctum sanctorum*: 'And hereby we understand the inmost, and the noblest, and the holiest things that we can find or feel in the tabernacle of our soul. And just as the things were in the Holy of Holies, that is, in the inmost part of the tabernacle, so also are the things which they signify, in the inmost part of our soul.' Here stands the spiritual ark signifying the union with God. Two golden cherubim, standing with outstretched wings on either side of the ark, cover the *oraculum*, the place where God's secret commands are received.⁵⁶

The expressiveness of Ruusbroec's metaphor is fully revealed on the threshold of the Holy of Holies, but every ornament seen en route to this sacred place represents an element of spiritual life, and things take on a deeper meaning the nearer they are to the ark. In the ten curtains hanging inside the tabernacle Ruusbroec recognised the ten commandments, but before the entrance to the Holy of Holies stood the four columns of understanding, love, unity of spirit and a 'going-up into the divine essence'. Affixed to the golden capitals of these columns (the highest being that of love) were the 'gold rings of grace' (*goutringhe der gracen*), where the curtain of the 'fullness of virtues' (*volheit der doghede*) was hung by the loops of rational consideration.

Ruusbroec's allegorising is astonishing, but just as curious – and characteristic of the deadly earnest with which Bible study was undertaken in those days – was Brother Gerard's caption. His architectural insight led him to conclude that this structure would collapse, which is why he added a gloss to explain that the capitals of the columns were joined by a crossbeam running 'from one side to the other, so that the columns stood motionless therein'.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ *Tabernacle* 5:6712–16: 'Ende hier mede versta wi dat innechste ende dat edelste ende dat heilichste dat wi in den tabernakel onser sielen venden ochte ghevoele moghen. Ende also also die dinghe waren in dat heileghe der heileghen – dat was: in dat binnenste des tabernakels – also sijn die dinghe die si bedieden in dat binnenste onser sielen.' See *Tabernacle* 2:13–284 on the forecourt.

⁵⁷ See the older edition of the *Tabernacle* (Ruusbroec, *Werken*, 1944–48, vol. II, p. 97, n. 4) for Brother Gerard's gloss ('van der eender zywant totter ander, soe dat die columpne

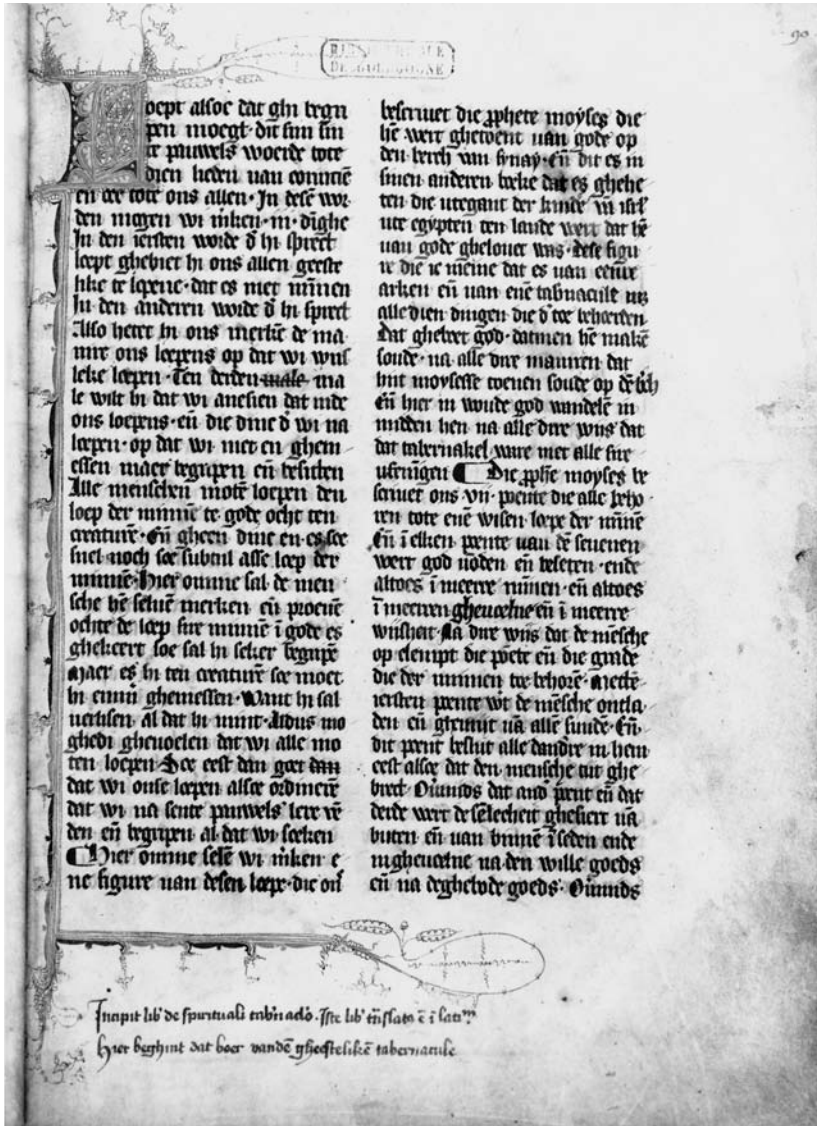


Fig. 7 Opening of the *Tabernacle* in the Groenendaal codex of Ruusbroec's oeuvre.

The nearly pathological meticulousness of the *Tabernacle* and its glosses fills modern readers with awe, but erecting an edifice of symbolic meanings on a foundation of factual truths was completely in keeping with the late-medieval requirements of the exegetical métier. Only reliable information was to be used to lay the basis for a commentary that could be metaphorical in the broadest sense of the word. Nicholas of Lyra, for example, even included drawings of the tabernacle and the high priest's vestments in the manuscripts of his *Postilla*, so that his meaning would be perfectly clear.⁵⁸

Ruusbroec did not take any chances either. His guide was the most widely used handbook for scriptural study: the *Historia scolastica* by Peter Comestor. The oeuvre of this 'master of histories' (*meester der istorien*), as Ruusbroec referred to him, contained a huge amount of information on biblical history, since Comestor had gone in search of background material for the strangest of details. Ruusbroec's work also displayed many similarities to older literature, including the seventh-century *De tabernaculo* by the Venerable Bede – which by no means proves that Ruusbroec examined the original text. The Venerable Bede's treatise had been excerpted in the *Glossa ordinaria*, and that standard reference work had been avidly consulted by the many authors who had meanwhile recognised in the Old Testament tabernacle a metaphor with great possibilities.⁵⁹

If we wish to form an idea of Ruusbroec's knowledge of exegesis, exploring the jungle of possible sources offers little hope of quick success. Better results can be obtained by taking a closer look at Ruusbroec's methodologies. The *Tabernacle* bears traces of an approved working method used by Nicholas of Lyra in his *Postilla*. This form of systematic exegesis of each biblical passage derived its name from the words *post illa* (after this), with which an author or teacher proceeded to treat a new pericope. Ruusbroec used phrases that were just as typical, such as 'After this, our Lord spoke thus' (*Hier na sprac onse here aldus*),

daer in onbeweghelyc stonden'). See *Tabernacle* 4:505–16 for the ten commandments, 4:1797–2039 for the curtain.

⁵⁸ Chenu 1976, pp. 192–209. On the drawings of Nicholas of Lyra, see Garnier 1984, p. 418.

⁵⁹ De Lubac 1979, vol. II, pp. 403–18. See in general Moore & Corbett 1938, p. xvii, on the Venerable Bede as the first in the tradition; cf. Van der Krakken 1935 on *De tabernaculo* as a source of the *Tabernacle*. For Ruusbroec's borrowings from the *Historia scolastica*, see Van den Berghe 1949, esp. p. 28, on the relationship between the *Tabernacle* and the *Historia scolastica*. Ruusbroec's borrowings from *Der naturen bloeme* must be seen in the same light. See Bastings 1991 and Van Elmbt 1989.

‘Furthermore, our Lord spoke thus’ (*Voert soe sprac onse here aldus*), ‘Now our Lord spoke further thus’ (*Nu sprac onse here voert aldus*) and ‘After this, the image continues thus’ (*Hierna volget die figure aldus*). These formulas are the standard introduction to the paraphrases of biblical passages that Ruusbroec then provided with commentary. This often took place in two parts. Announcements such as ‘Here you should know’ (*Hier suldi weten*) were followed by further explanation or additional information on the scriptural quotation. After giving his readers all the necessary information, Ruusbroec took time to ponder, comprehend, prove and fathom. When examining the meaning of God’s word, he began with such phrases as ‘Herein we note’ (*Hierinne merken wi*), ‘Herein we understand’ (*Hierinne verstaen wi*), ‘Herewith we prove’ (*Hiermede proeven wi*) and ‘In this we are taught’ (*Hierinne werden wi geleert*). Information led to insight, just as knowledge led to wisdom.⁶⁰

Ruusbroec’s basic assumptions in the *Tabernacle* become even clearer when examined in the light of the medieval fourfold exegesis. The historical interpretation relates to the literal meaning; the allegorical sense reveals the connection with religious truths; the search for the tropological meaning raises questions about the mystical or moral significance of God’s word; the anagogical interpretation concerns the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell. If we apply these exegetical formulas to the tabernacle, we end up with the following: literally, the dwelling-place described in Exodus; allegorically, the Church; tropologically, the soul; anagogically, heaven. Ruusbroec knew all these variant meanings and typological applications, but he chose the mystical explanation of the tabernacle as a metaphor for the human soul: ‘Now I want to continue my subject, and I am going to teach us how each rational person shall make a spiritual tabernacle for God, in which he shall eternally dwell united with God.’⁶¹

⁶⁰ On the concept of *postillae*, see Reventlov 1994, pp. 260–61. Examples of similar formulations in the *Tabernacle* include 4:656, 4:683, 4:794, 4:840, 4:924, 4:1153, 4:1208, 4:1230, 4:1292, 4:1409, 4:1685, 4:1797, 4:2040. Announcements of more detailed explanation: 4:658, 4:729–4:747, 4:1034, 4:1456–60 and 4:1558. Deeper meaning: 4:662, 4:690, 4:703, 4:762. Cf. also 4:852, 4:889 and 4:986.

⁶¹ The quotation on mystical interpretation is *Tabernacle* 4:97–99: ‘Nu wille ic voert mine materien volgen ende will ons leren hoe iegewelc redelec minsche gode sal maken I geestelec tabernakel daer hi verenecht met gode ewelec wonen sal’; cf. 0:27–28: ‘Nu wille ic voert mire materien volgen ende wille ons leeren hoe iegewelc redelec minsche gode sal maken I geestelec tabernakel daer hi, verenecht met gode, ewelec inne woenen sal’; see also 2:10–12, 2:56–57. For a detailed discussion of the fourfold exegesis, see De Lubac 1979, vol. I.

It is typical of Ruusbroec to explain his plan of action and starting points in only a few cursory phrases. Many exegetes used a prologue to their commentary to render an account of their methodology and approach, but Ruusbroec keeps his hermeneutics to himself and gives only a summary disclosure of his strategy, announcing that the text is divided into seven sections, with the assurance that ‘in each of the seven points, God is found and possessed’ (*in elken poente van den sevenen wert God vonden ende beseten*). This seeming nonchalance does not detract from the exegetical care Ruusbroec lavished on his *Tabernacle*, recording with extreme precision details of the tabernacle’s construction, the groundwork, the overseers (including their names and family history), the building materials, dimensions, construction techniques, coverings and furnishings of the shrine. Only very rarely – when the sources are inadequate or contradictory – does Ruusbroec venture his own solution. Thus there is uncertainty about the fastening and securing of the walls of the tabernacle, because, Ruusbroec says, our Lord says nothing about it: ‘And this is the reason that the saints and the doctors do not say the same thing about this, but each speaks from his own point of view, as he sees fit. Hence I may also say what I think.’⁶²

According to Ruusbroec, this was how things stood: each of the side walls of the tabernacle had five gold rings, holding upright rods as long as the walls were high. To strengthen the structure, other rods were inserted through the rings crosswise. This testifies to some technical insight on Ruusbroec’s part, but the rest of the paragraph shows that he was more interested in buttressing the allegorical edifice of the human soul. He identified the vertical rod as the ‘inspiration of God’ (*ingeesten goods*). The five rings through which this rod was placed are the five interior senses which embrace the ‘free inward-working of God’ (*vrie inwerken goods*) as an eternal source of nourishment for our spiritual life. The horizontal rods stand for the knowledge and understanding which allow the walls of faith, hope and love to maintain their rightful place in religious life.⁶³

The reader of the *Tabernacle* is both amazed that a great mind could let itself be carried away by such eccentric solutions to purely theoretical

⁶² *Tabernacle* 4:1420–22: ‘Ende dit es die sake dat de heiligen ende de lereren niet gelijc daer ave en spreken. Maer iegewelc sprekt ute sinen gemerke na dat heme dunct. Ende alsoe magic oec seggen na mijn bevoelen.’ See *Tabernacle* 0:27–28 for the quotation about the seven points. On methodological reflection, see Dahan 1999, pp. 389–444.

⁶³ *Tabernacle* 4:1565–70 and 4:1599–1603.

problems and awe-struck by the author's intellectual powers, which could endow literally everything with a deeper meaning. Ruusbroec plodded on, alternating endlessly between straightforward textual criticism and allegorical imagination, until the scriptural shrine had been converted into a veritable hall of mirrors, reflecting religious ethics and mystical virtues. Roof-covering, tarpaulin, tent-peg, nail – no attribute was too insignificant to be fitted logically into the whole.

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Authors usually let their exegetical commentary follow the course taken by the biblical passages under discussion – which in the case of the tabernacle meant that the description of the structure should proceed from the inside out. From the start, however, Ruusbroec was determined to end up in the Holy of Holies as the place where the faithful find God. He therefore ventured to work in the opposite direction, 'from without to within and from the lowest to the highest'.⁶⁴

The liberties he took are revealing. Ruusbroec knew the rules of exegesis, but the unwritten laws of the genre were not sacred to him, which does not make it any easier to determine the place of Ruusbroec's *Tabernacle* in the exegetical tradition. The fourteenth century has sometimes been described as a period of decline in biblical scholarship, because experiments in ever freer forms of mystical exegesis were carried out with insufficient regard for the basis of historical interpretation. The *Tabernacle* seems to be a perfect example of that tendency. Ruusbroec proved to be a skilled exegete, but he was the first to put such intellectual delving into God's word into perspective. He compared those who preferred the letter of scripture to its spirit with the kite, which is so afraid of large birds of prey that it first feeds on small birds, then on carcasses, and finally on insects, until it eventually dies of hunger.⁶⁵

In fact, Ruusbroec adhered closely to the old principles. It has been pointed out more than once that the exegetical methods of Hugh of St Victor could have inspired the *Tabernacle*. This great scholar from Paris played a major role in the most fertile period of medieval Bible study. In the twelfth century the new masters of scripture rejected the malleable spiritual exegesis of monastic culture. The clerics at the Abbey of St Victor in Paris succeeded in combining the modern views from the

⁶⁴ See *Tabernacle* 2:13–18 on the reverse order of the treatment: 'van buten inwert ende van den nedersten tote den hoechsten'.

⁶⁵ Ruusbroec speaks of the kite (*alietus*) in *Tabernacle* 5:6327–45.

world of the cathedral schools with the early, contemplative monastic traditions. Hugh of St Victor developed an influential programme of Bible study, aimed at acquiring the knowledge necessary to arrive at the understanding that led to wisdom: in his view, spiritual exegesis must be based on a literal interpretation of the Bible.⁶⁶

In his interpretation of the tabernacle, Ruusbroec let himself be led by the tradition of the Victorines. The most unquestionable evidence of this is the work that the mystic evidently consulted: Peter Comestor's *Historia scolastica*. This Paris scholar maintained close ties to the Abbey of St Victor, where he eventually spent his last years. Comestor's handbook was intended especially to provide material for a literal interpretation of Holy Scripture, which could function as the stepping stone to spiritual exegesis based on the Victorine model.⁶⁷

In Comestor's work Ruusbroec could find everything he wanted to know about the tabernacle – and much, much more – but the *Historia scolastica* provided facts only. For the mystical interpretation of all this information Ruusbroec was apparently left to his own devices. For example, in the *Historia scolastica* Ruusbroec could read all kinds of things about the Arabic origins of myrrh, used as an ingredient in the oil with which the priests of the tabernacle were anointed. The Arabs were in the habit of pruning the young shoots sprouting from the sides of the myrrh tree. The cut-off shoots were subsequently burned, but because the smoke of burning myrrh was a health hazard, the gum resin of another bush, the storax, was thrown into the fire. This gave off a pleasant odour and kept the bystanders from becoming ill. That might already have been more than many readers wanted to know, but Ruusbroec's discussion only begins here. Just as the myrrh symbolises Jesus' suffering, the shoots stand for the meditations on this subject that must be burned in the fire of love. Newcomers to spiritual life may find the story of the Passion difficult to digest, in the same way that myrrh is both fragrant and 'extremely bitter in flavour' (*harde better van smake*). Therefore, the pious person should not contemplate the myrrh of suffering without the gum resin of God's mercy, which is sweet as honey.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ On mystical exegesis in the late Middle Ages, see Smalley 1952, pp. 281–92 and Duclow 1987. See Châtillon 1984, esp. pp. 178–86, with regard to the Victorines.

⁶⁷ See Luscombe 1985 on Comestor; for the *Historia scolastica*, see Berendrecht 1996, pp. 87–88, and the literature listed there.

⁶⁸ See *Tabernacle* 5:1827–97 regarding myrrh and storax. See *PL* 198, col. 1188, for the parallel passages in the *Historia scolastica*.

The lesson a literary historian can learn from this discussion of forestry in Arabia is that he should not jump to the conclusion that Ruusbroec's allegorising had taken on a life of its own. Even where his pious inventions apparently stray far from the tabernacle, his interpretation proves to be firmly anchored in exegetical literature like the *Historia scolastica*. However, to give Ruusbroec the honour that is his due, we would need to know which copy of this work he consulted. Even though there is almost no chance of this manuscript ever surfacing, there are compelling reasons to sketch a picture of Ruusbroec's immediate source.

Within the rich textual tradition of the *Historia scolastica*, one manuscript in particular deserves our attention. The first text in this codex is Comestor's *Historia scolastica*, which is followed by a long series of models for allegorical exegesis by Richard of St Victor which often supplemented it. The book also contains the *Allegoriae super tabernaculum Moysi* by the Parisian theologian Peter of Poitiers, as well as an anonymous commentary on Leviticus. Everything that could have inspired Ruusbroec with respect to the method and subject matter of his *Tabernacle*, including the long chapters on the priesthood, is collected here in one volume. This particular book was deposited some time before 1400 in the library of the Sorbonne in Paris, which makes it unlikely that Ruusbroec, an apparent homebody, ever laid eyes on it. Nevertheless, the existence of such codices gives us a good idea of the nature of Ruusbroec's source material.⁶⁹

We must seriously consider the possibility that Ruusbroec was familiar with similar compilations of exegetical treatises. The above-mentioned collection of texts exudes the atmosphere of the Parisian academic world to which the community of St Victor still belonged. Although by the fourteenth century the abbey had lost much of its former lustre, it was still a venerable centre of learning in the field of exegesis, if only by virtue of its library, which was then nearly the largest in western Europe. For that reason alone it is significant that Groenendaal was in direct touch with the Abbey of St Victor in the years when Ruusbroec was working on his commentary. There exist scraps of correspondence

⁶⁹ This is MS. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 15254; see the description in Moore & Corbett 1936, pp. 54–56. The allegorical models are the so-called *Allegoriae in Vetus et Novum Testamentum* from the work of Richard of St Victor (see Châtillon 1958). For the link with the *Historia scolastica*, see Chenu 1976, pp. 197–98 and Luscombe 1985, pp. 123–24. Cf. Van Dalen-Oskam 1997, pp. 190–95, regarding the actual source of Maerlant's adaptation of the *Historia scolastica* in the *Rijmbijbel*.

implying that after 1350 the priests in the Zonien Forest joined the confederation of Victorine monasteries as canons regular of St Augustine. Even so, their relations were not very close. As early as 1355, a circular reported Coudenberg's failure to attend a chapter meeting, and in 1366 the canons received a letter from Paris, severely reprimanding them for their lifestyle and their profession formula. Is it merely a coincidence that in this same period a Middle Dutch translation – stemming from Groenendaal itself or its immediate vicinity – began to circulate of the Rule of Augustine, including the commentary by Hugh of St Victor? Later on the skies no doubt cleared. An allegorical woodcut made around 1480 immortalises famous men of Groenendaal in the company of Victorines and representatives of other orders of canons who followed the Rule of Augustine. In the depiction Ruusbroec converses with John of St Victor, a Paris canon and author of a world chronicle dating from the first half of the fourteenth century. Considering the difference in their ages, it is extremely unlikely that these two men ever met, but the earliest contacts between Groenendaal and St Victor date from as early as 1350. A salient fact with respect to the background of the *Tabernacle* is that the lines of communication between the two religious institutions ran not only through the history of mystical thought but also, very concretely, through the monastic federation of St Victor. The relations between St Victor and Groenendaal supply Ruusbroec's ambitious 'Tabernacle Project' with an intellectual context unique in Middle Dutch literature. Ruusbroec was a late pupil of the grand masters of the Victorine school. In a distant imitation of these eminent scholars, Ruusbroec created his 'exposition of the tabernacle' (*exposiccie vanden tabernacule*). But no matter how much honour he gained by writing the *Tabernacle*, in Groenendaal Ruusbroec was admired chiefly for his charismatic personality.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ See Jocqué 1985, pp. 218–20. See also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 39, and for the data, see in particular Dykmans 1940, pp. 394–95, with reference to Bonnard 1904, p. 367 (but see esp. p. 366, n. 3). On the woodcut, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 185; on John of St Victor, see Guyot-Bachy 2000. See De Flou 1901 for the translation of Hugh of St Victor's commentary on the Rule of Augustine. Both of the earliest manuscripts with this text also contain work by Ruusbroec and belonged to Rooklooster. For the manuscripts, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 48 and 51; cf. De Vreese 1894.

4. Jan van Leeuwen and the Lay Brothers

No one sang Ruusbroec's praises as exuberantly or as frequently as Jan van Leeuwen. In his eyes there was no virtue the good prior did not embody perfectly, no mortal so full of God's grace, no one so illuminated by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. In all of Christendom there was not a more righteous, faithful, spiritual person. Hyperbole seems at times to be second nature to Van Leeuwen, but he sounds no less sincere when he says he is fortunate just to live in Ruusbroec's shadow: 'But I, poor sinful worm, cannot equal him. Nevertheless, I recognise his holy state on the inside. My Lord Jan van Ruusbroec, prior of Groenendaal, rest in peace with Jesus Christ our Lord. I hope we will never part.'⁷¹

Who, in fact, was Jan van Leeuwen, this ardent admirer of Ruusbroec? An adequate answer to that question would require a separate monograph, yet any book on Ruusbroec must necessarily include Van Leeuwen. As the mystic's most faithful disciple – one who even followed his example and produced numerous writings – he provides us with an excellent opportunity to examine the effect Ruusbroec's lessons and literature had on his pupils. First, however, let us take a look at the personality of Groenendaal's cook.

Van Leeuwen's work is characterised not just by his adoration of Ruusbroec, but also by his exuberance, for his texts are a jumble of bold statements, radical opinions and wild outpourings in an erratic mixture of prose and fragmentary rhyme. Once the cook got going, he burst forth in a torrent of unpolished prose and awkward imagery. Van Leeuwen's style is striking, but cohesion of composition was not his forte. This lack of lucidity prompted the Groenendaal scribes to give Van Leeuwen's texts such very general titles as *Van tienderhande materien* (*On Ten Different Subjects*) and *Van menegherhande goeder leeringhen* (*On Many Good Teachings*). Another problem was that Van Leeuwen sometimes deviated from his original subject so much that his text remained unfinished, as evidenced by *Vanden seven tekenen der sonnen* (*On the Seven Signs of the Zodiac*).⁷²

⁷¹ De Vreese 1895, pp. 180–81: 'Maer ic en can mi daer hem niet gheliken, aerm sundech woerm; nochtan bekinnic al sinen heileghen staet van binnen. Her Jan van Rusbroecht, prior van Groenendale, nu blijft in vreden met Jhesus Cristus onsen heere, ic hope wi en scede nemeere.'

⁷² On Van Leeuwen, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 100–17 and Geirnaert & Reynaert 1993. Still of importance are the introductory essays (with anthology) in De Vooy's 1903 and 1915–16, and the comprehensive anthology with introduction in Axters 1943.

According to tradition, Van Leeuwen learned how to read and write at Groenendaal. If that is true, he made the most of his newly acquired skills, for Van Leeuwen's writings surpass in both number and length the work of his revered confessor. However, the cook's enlightened chop-logic could not rival the impact and importance of the *Espousals*. Jan Frans Willems, who in 1845 published Jan van Leeuwen's eulogies on Ruusbroec, even considered the cook mentally deficient: 'A pity that the man's writings contain so few lines that are coherent or that testify to good sense.' This judgement has meanwhile been revised, but Van Leeuwen's rehabilitation has not yet led to a full-blown study of his work or a modern edition of an oeuvre that numbers more than twenty titles. Anyone seeking to fathom the simple cook's complex personality must still return to the manuscripts, but there, too, it is impossible to penetrate to the depths of his soul: a prologue to Van Leeuwen's collected works states that in places the text has been adapted for the sake of clarity, and that the 'manner of his speaking' (*maniere van sinen spreken*) has been polished to some extent.⁷³

Toning down Van Leeuwen's words was a wise decision, for the cook did not hesitate to speak his mind. He accused secular and ecclesiastical authorities alike of greed, corruption and abuse of power. He called Meister Eckhart a 'devilish person' (*duwelijk mensche*), and did not shrink from writing about wretches who swear 'by the shit and the arse-hole and the nails of our Lord' (*biden stronte ende biden eerschate of biden naghelen ons heren*). Moreover, he considered the situation in the monasteries to be so reprehensible that he would rather associate with murderers, whoremongers and 'daft women' (*dulle wiven*).⁷⁴

Van Leeuwen made no secret of the fact that his candour had often met with criticism. He stuck to his guns, despite asking God to forgive him if he had 'said or written anything wrong in all [his] teachings or writings'. People had wilfully misunderstood him, he maintained, by taking literally what he meant metaphorically. It was a hopeless situation: 'Never has anyone spoken so clearly that his words could not be criticised.'⁷⁵

⁷³ Quotation to be found in De Vooy 1903, p. 145; on the edition and dissemination of Van Leeuwen, see also Geirnaert & Reynaert 1993, pp. 199–201. Earlier quotation in Willems 1845, p. 222.

⁷⁴ De Vooy 1915–16, pp. 153–62; Kok 1973, p. 153; Van Eeghem 1956, pp. 142 and 104.

⁷⁵ Quotations from De Vooy 1915–16, p. 144 ('dat ic in eeneghen dinghen hebbe messect in alle mijnre leringhen oft messcreven') and Delteyk, p. 205 ('Nye en sprac yemant so claerlic, hi en mochte in sinen woerden wel begrepen werden').

Ruusbroec's disciple was a bundle of contradictions. In defiance of all stylistic conventions of mystic discourse, Van Leeuwen spoke the language of the street, but he also had his sensitive side. In *Die rolle van der woedegher minnen* (*The Scroll of Passionate Love*) he staged a dialogue with the personification of Love that was full of reminiscences of Hadewijch's poetry. Van Leeuwen was impressed by her mysticism, but this did not stop him from denouncing what he considered the beguines' shortcomings. Then again, it was also typical of him to offer these women good-natured advice about what to do in case of sexual harassment. A beguine, he said, should try to dodge her assailant, but if assault threatened to turn into rape, she was allowed, with Van Leeuwen's approval, to kill the offender.⁷⁶

It is not easy to fathom Ruusbroec's cook, who asserts in one text that he is as untrained as the apostles, but in the next manages to give a crystal-clear definition of *phylosophya* as love of knowledge in order to 'demonstrate the distinction between divine and human things'. Such pearls of wisdom make one wonder how drastically the Groenendaal scribes adapted Van Leeuwen's works, but in any case his writings show that he was much better versed in literature than he pretended to be. Despite his widely advertised simplicity, Van Leeuwen quoted more authors by name than Ruusbroec did: from Augustine to Aristotle, including of course Dionysius, whose 'utter darkness of all our reason' (*puer donckerheit al onsen verstanen*) was no mystery to the cook: 'No matter what all the masters may argue and teach, it is nothing, or less than nothing, compared with the transparency (*clærheit*) that is God Himself.'⁷⁷

The many incongruities in the cook's writings indicate that his move to Groenendaal was preceded by an unsettled period, in which he hopped from one job to another. According to Pomerius, Van Leeuwen had been a drifter. Anecdotes dished up by the cook himself reveal that

⁷⁶ *Die rolle van der woedegher minnen* was first published in De Vooy's 1915–16, pp. 119–40, cf. p. 124. See pp. 241–44 regarding beguines. The *Rolle* is also edited in Axters 1943, pp. 130–35.

⁷⁷ Van Eeghem 1956, p. 93: 'God es een puer donckerheit al onsen verstanen, want wat wier af spreken ende oec watter alle meesters af redenen ende leeren moghen, dits also niet ochte min dan niet jeghen die clærheit die god selve is.' See Axters 1943, p. 96 (*phylosophya*) and p. 109 (apostles). See Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 101–03 and p. 116, n. 41, on Van Leeuwen's level of education. Comparative study in Axters 1958a and b. On the intellectual development and level of schooling of lay brothers in general, see Schreiner 1993.



Fig. 8 Jan van Leeuwen in the kitchen. Miniature in the Groenendaal manuscript of Van Leeuwen's oeuvre.

he was a jack-of-all-trades. He knew the smith's craft and the pecking order among the kitchen staff at court. He saw through the practices of the 'penny preachers' (*penninc prekers*) who propagated God's word for a fee, and had formed an opinion of the 'foolish drivels' (*sotte trufferien*) of the minstrels, but he also knew a thing or two about the beggars who lived a life of idleness, pretending to adhere to the principles of apostolic poverty, not to mention supposedly inspired laymen who, when suddenly overcome by 'spiritual earnestness' (*gheesteliker eernstachticheit*), turned to address the people, presuming to talk about God better than trained clerics.⁷⁸

Van Leeuwen knew all about the evil practices of 'sisters and lollards and begging beghards' (*swesteren ende lolarden ende broetbagaerden*). On more than one occasion he had been accompanied on his wanderings by another vagabond, but the cook had broken old ties, and it does seem as if he attempted to prove this by aiming his sharpest arrows at Meister Eckhart. In his texts Van Leeuwen repeatedly opens fire on him, and he even wrote a separate 'booklet on Meister Eckhart's erroneous teachings' (*boexken van meester Eckhaerts leere daer hi in doelde*). After his posthumous condemnation as a heretic, the German preacher had grown into the patron saint of spiritually inclined lay people accused of Free Spirit heresy. In particular, texts stemming from the Low Countries present Meister Eckhart as a sympathiser and friend of groups belonging to a mystic sub-culture of beghards and 'grey sisters'.⁷⁹

The cook sought to distance himself from their godless practices. He was eager to condemn those who abandon their work as soon as they hear someone preaching poverty of spirit – one of Meister Eckhart's favourite subjects. Indeed, Jan van Leeuwen was different, and preferable in every way, for he was always ready to lend a helping hand, without his spiritual life suffering for a moment: 'For outwardly I've done great, strong, rough work my whole life long . . . and also inwardly, in [doing] spiritual, holy works, God's grace has never been idle in me, not even for an hour.'⁸⁰

⁷⁸ For Jan van Leeuwen and the smithy, see the treatise *Wat dat een armen mensche van gheeste toebehoert* (Dorresteyn 1934); see Avonds 1982 on Van Leeuwen's knowledge of the court kitchen (the conclusion that Van Leeuwen himself served as court cook is highly speculative). See De Vooy's 1915–16, p. 263, for *penninc prekers* and minstrels. See Warnar 1995b, p. 17, with regard to Van Leeuwen and lay mysticism.

⁷⁹ Published in Kok 1973. Van Leeuwen's fierce criticism of Eckhart has earned him a place in the rich and varied studies of the German mystic. For the latest on this subject, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 19 and 114–17.

⁸⁰ De Vooy's 1915–16, p. 142: 'Want van buten soe hebbic alle mijn leefdaghe grooten

Van Leeuwen was driven by the holy fire of the convert, who – thanks to Ruusbroec – had found the true path to perfection and was determined to give abundant proof of it, in part to urge others to follow his example. Perhaps Van Leeuwen's lavish praise of his teacher's orthodoxy was even intended to persuade his former friends to come out of the darkness of beghard-*dom* and ascend to the light in Ruusbroec's Groenendaal: 'To this end I've said this to you, so that you may hear his [Ruusbroec's] holy teachings and adhere to them and completely strive for inwardness. Thus you may not stray in foreign schools, for his teachings come from above and flow through him, due to the spirit of God, which ebbs and flows through him.'⁸¹

This message would certainly have been well received by someone like Johannes de Rode, Jan van Leeuwen's assistant and later successor in the kitchen at Groenendaal. De Rode had been a weaver in Brussels, where there were many beghards among the textile workers, making this branch of industry an environment where dubious ideas about mysticism were thought to flourish. In the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec had already suggested the existence of a connection when he compared heretical Quietism with the loom 'which itself is inactive and awaits its master, when he wishes to work'. First and foremost, however, Ruusbroec must have felt surrounded in Groenendaal by brothers who had been persuaded by Van Leeuwen that his confessor was the most reliable guide to mystical life.⁸²

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The history of Middle Dutch mysticism has much to gain by examining all the subjects raised by Van Leeuwen. The scope of this book confines our interest in him to his relations with Ruusbroec, mainly in order to portray the mystic in the midst of his disciples. This is a risky business, for Van Leeuwen was a law unto himself, if only because he alone among the *conversi* took up the pen. It is not easy, however, to

sterken groven arbeit ghedaen... ende oec van binnen in gheesteliken heyleghe werken en heeft die gracie gods in mij een ure niet ledich noch ijdel gheweest in mij'; cf. Ampe 1959, p. 227.

⁸¹ De Vreese 1895, p. 179: 'Daer om hebbic u dit voer seit, op dat ghi sine heileghe leeringhe hoert ende daer bij blijft, ende vast inweert crijcht. Soe en moechdy niet dolen in vremder scolen, want sine leringhe es rechte van boven neder vloeiende dore hem, overmids dat gheesten gods, dat dore hem eebt ende vloeit.'

⁸² The quotation concerning the loom is in *Espousals* b2430–31: 'dat selve ledich es ende sijns meesters beidt wanneer hi werken wilt'; cf. Schweitzer 1982. For Johannes de Rode, see Dykmans 1940, p. 49.

sketch an accurate profile of the Groenendaal lay brothers by any other means. The chronicles suggest that they were a mixed bunch. Hendrik the baker, in all his holy simplicity, was regularly swindled when sent on errands to Brussels. Arnoldus Bobnagel, on the other hand, was a reliable and serious assistant in business matters (*in officio procuratoris*), as was the lay brother Arnoldus Staes, who was no less obliging than Van Leeuwen, always ready to help his confrères at ungodly hours, both in the kitchen and in the infirmary.⁸³

The lay brothers also deserve our attention as Ruusbroec's earliest pupils, since – as Brother Gerard said in his prologue – those who joined Ruusbroec were primarily people 'of worldly as well as religious habits' (*van weerliken abite ende oec van religiosen*). Their names appear in the list of lay brothers in the Groenendaal chronicles, in which Walter Rademaker and Jan van Leeuwen are followed by Arnoldus Staes – the fifth lay brother, about whom it is said that he was involved in the community from the very beginning (*in initio foundationis*). The same can presumably be said about the mason Hendrik van Lummene and the carpenter Nicolaas van Lombeke. Both craftsmen could have helped to build the chapel of Groenendaal and the priests' new accommodations. Van Lombeke, in any case, knew Ruusbroec and his friends Hinckaert and Coudenberg from their years together in Brussels. The carpenter owned a house in Loxemstraat, the same street in which the three priests had lived together in Hinckaert's house before moving to the Zonien Forest.⁸⁴

One cannot help thinking – especially if Jan van Leeuwen's works are at all representative of the lay brothers' mood – that as a prior and spiritual guide Ruusbroec had more on his mind than 'the life of a good priest' (*goeder priesters vite*) elaborated upon in the *Tabernacle* and the *Beguines*. The cook may well have found his calling in Groenendaal, but the extreme ups and downs of his spiritual life were not over yet. Driven by a great yearning for God, Van Leeuwen experienced moments of supreme rapture, but sometimes, bereft of the privilege of feeling God's presence, he lapsed into total despair. At such times he felt as though he had been demoted from 'beloved son' (*ghetrouw soneken*) to 'disowned bastard' (*verstoten bastaert*), as though he had first been a squire

⁸³ Dykmans 1940, p. 177 (Hendrik the baker), p. 142 (Arnoldus Staes) and p. 171 (Arnoldus Bobnagel).

⁸⁴ Brother Gerard quotation in De Vreese 1895, p. 9. Dykmans 1940, p. 142 (Arnoldus) and p. 48 (Hendrik and Nicolaas).

and chamberlain and was now a stable boy and ‘lowly servant’ (*scamel garscoen*). Van Leeuwen experienced his deepest crisis in 1349, when the feeling that he had been forsaken by God almost drove him mad. One night he was assailed by ‘seven terrors’ (*seven allendicheyden*), before being delivered from despair by the realisation that suffering is chastening.⁸⁵

Did Van Leeuwen endure this night of terror thanks to Ruusbroec? The fact is that the cook reported these ‘terrors’ in his *Seven Signs of the Zodiac*, in which – clearly following the example set by Ruusbroec in his *Espousals* – he linked the successive moods of spiritual life with the characteristics of the zodiacal signs and the passing of the seasons. One of the things Ruusbroec had described was how, after a hot summer of violent passion, despair at the fact that God’s grace was not forthcoming could pierce one like the chill of autumn. Van Leeuwen took some liberties in handling the symbolism of the zodiacal signs, but he found enough consolation in the *Espousals* to accept the frightening adventure of his ‘seven terrors’ as belonging to the natural laws of mystical life.⁸⁶

Further comparison of the texts will undoubtedly yield more proof of Jan van Leeuwen’s dependence on Ruusbroec, but their writings do not supply the information necessary to judge their relationship or even the influence the prior exerted on the lay brother. Van Leeuwen read Ruusbroec’s treatises carefully, but he listened even more often to the master’s wise lessons and explications: ‘You do well to listen to his voice, for his writings please God.’⁸⁷

Significantly, Van Leeuwen seems scarcely to distinguish between Ruusbroec’s spoken and written words. Only the disciples in Ruusbroec’s immediate circle enjoyed the privilege of hearing straight from the author’s mouth what lay between the lines of his writings. Pomerius says that those who asked Ruusbroec for a word to the wise were seldom disappointed. When the spirit moved him, the prior could go on speaking until the small hours, keeping his audience in thrall until Matins. On such occasions Ruusbroec was ‘so fiery in his *collatio* . . . as though one had made sparks come out of a stone’. *Collationes* were among the

⁸⁵ See Axters 1943, pp. 181–83 (despair) and pp. 183–88 for the ‘seven terrors’ (*seven allendicheyden*).

⁸⁶ On Van Leeuwen, see Van Eeghem 1956, p. 110. For Ruusbroec on patience (*gelatenheid*), see the *Espousals* b725–29; for the whole, see b668 ff.

⁸⁷ De Vreese 1895, p. 178: ‘Hoert sine stemme, soe doedy wale, want sine scrijft es gode bequame.’

prior's duties: ranging from sermon and lecture to edifying address, such instructive talks had always been part of monastic life. At these frequent assemblies everything relating to one's inner education could come up for discussion: questions concerning religious doctrine, the practice of virtue, attitudes to God and one's fellow men, the struggle against sin and temptation, religious ethics and spiritual progression.⁸⁸

In these talks and lectures, Ruusbroec may sometimes have taken his texts as the point of departure, but he must also have taught his Groenendaal disciples a lot of things that do not occur in his writings. Thus Van Leeuwen maintains that it was Ruusbroec who had taught him 'profound humility of heart' (*grontoetmoedicheit*: literally 'ground-humility') – a virtue certainly possessed by the cook, who said that he had never met anyone who had more to say about this deeply experienced humility than 'my dear, illustrious confessor' (*minen lieven gloriosen biechtvader*). In Ruusbroec's books we search in vain for passages to corroborate this assertion. Only once – and then merely in passing – does the mystic use the word *grondooetmoedegh*, and yet we cannot rule out the possibility that Ruusbroec actually taught this virtue to his pupils, since Van Leeuwen was not the only one who knew 'the humble in heart' (*grontoetmoedich mensche*). This expression also appears in *On the Twelve Virtues*, now attributed to the Groenendaal canon Godfried Wevel, even though the text appears under Ruusbroec's name in a number of manuscripts, including the Latin translation by Geert Grote. This is not so odd, for the first chapters of the *Virtues* contain passages from the *Espousals* recast as discussions of religious characteristics, including 'profound humility of heart' (*grontoetmoedicheit*). Wevel seems to have incorporated Ruusbroec's lessons in the *Virtues*, and this impression is strengthened by the way in which Godfried Wevel is introduced in the only manuscript that ascribes the *Virtues* to him: 'one of the disciples of the reverend in God and spiritual prior Jan van Ruusbroec himself'.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ On *collationes* and books of *collationes* (especially in the circles of the Devotio Moderna), see Van Buuren 1993; Mertens 1996; Scheepsma 1997, pp. 70–74. On instructive talks as a prior's duty, see Bataillon 1986, pp. 562–63. Pomerius quotation in Verdeyen 1981b, p. 151 (De Leu 1885, p. 295): 'in sijn collacie alsoe vierich [...] als often geysteren hadde doen comen uut enen steen'.

⁸⁹ On Van Leeuwen's humility, see Ampe 1959, esp. pp. 241–45. See De Vreese 1895, p. 255, for Van Leeuwen on Ruusbroec's 'humility of heart' (*grontoetmoedicheit*). See *Spiegel* 1384 for Ruusbroec's use of the word. Cf. Reypens 1967, p. 22, for *grontoetmoedich* in Jordaens. The *Virtues* was included in the first editions of Ruusbroec's works; see David & Snellaert 1858–68, vol. III, pp. 1–116 and in the first edition of Ruusbroec's *Werken*, vol. IV, though here doubt is cast on its authenticity; the second

If the *Espousals*-inspired chapters on humility, obedience, resignation and patience in the *Virtues* were actually based on Ruusbroec's *collationes*, it is remarkable that mystical reflections were subordinated to edifying themes. Such subjects were not wasted on the brothers of Groenendaal. Pomerius relates that Ruusbroec's confidants repeatedly asked him 'for edification' (*om gestichticheit*), to help them resist temptation and to devote themselves to the practice of virtue. The mystic's inspired words often succeeded in letting his pupils savour once again the 'taste of sweet devotions' (*smakelijcheit van sueter devocien*), but no doubt the tenor of Ruusbroec's discourse was less cheerful at times: 'For there is much affection – that is, innate, natural desire, obstinacy and self-conceit or the mere desire for novelty – which is seen and taken to be great holiness.' These words of warning appear in *On the Four Temptations*, in which Ruusbroec sketches the dangers of four 'errors' (*dolinghen*), to make his audience aware of the temptations on the path to perfection. Thematically the text is completely in keeping with the subject matter of the *collationes*, and the *Temptations* is short enough to belong to that genre.⁹⁰

Another treatise that meets those requirements is *On the Christian Faith*, which – like the *Temptations* – stems from the beginning of Ruusbroec's Groenendaal years. The *Faith* is his most didactic work. While in all his others texts the mystic ascends to the heights of contemplation, here he keeps his options open, offering a point-by-point discussion of the articles of faith: no reflections on divine persons and the essence of the Godhead, but rather the remark that one must not think that God actually sits or stands or has hands, for He is simply a spirit.

edition excludes the text. There has been much speculation as to Ruusbroec's authorship of the *Virtues*. The first to attribute this piece of writing to Wevel was Dykmans 1940, pp. 328–30, n. 5, with the quotation: 'eyner von den discipelen de eirwirdigen in got und geistlichen priors herren Johan Rueszbroches da selbest'. See in general Lievens 1960d; Mertens 1995b, n. 9; Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 118–24. See Ampe 1967 on Geert Grote as the translator of the *Virtues*. The idea that the *Virtues* is connected with lectures and sermons is lent credibility by the influence of Eckhart's *Rede der onderscheidung* (*Talks of Instruction*) later on in the text. This text also stems from the tradition of monastic instruction (Ruh 1990–99, vol. III, pp. 258–67; see Ubbink 1978, pp. 182–92, on Eckhart in the *Virtues*).

⁹⁰ *Temptations* 292–97: 'Want het ees veel affectie, dat es ingheborne lost der natueren, eenwille ende eyghen goetduncken ochte nievinghelheit, daermen grote heilicheit acht ende waent.' Pomerius quotation in Verdeyen 1981b, p. 156 (De Leu 1885, pp. 299–300). The *Temptations* also survives in a manuscript containing Tauler's sermons (Mertens 1997) and has also been traced in the company of catechetical pieces collected under the *collatio*-like title *Een boecxken van heiligen sproeken ende leringen* (*A Booklet of Holy Sayings and Teachings*) (exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 62).

The final chord of the text is truly remarkable. With reference to the last article of faith, which deals with eternal life, Ruusbroec describes the bliss of heaven and the horrors of hell. To this end, he employs traditional images, but with the medieval fascination for realistic detail and – unique in Ruusbroec’s oeuvre – a time-honoured *exemplum*. Once upon a time, he explains, there were three gluttonous monks in the Rhine Valley who always dined outside their monastery because they wished to eat their fill of ‘special fare’ (*sonderlinghe spise*). After two of the monks unexpectedly died, one of them appeared before the remaining monk. To demonstrate the nature of his infernal torments, the apparition let a drop of sweat fall from his hands onto a metal candlestick, which shrivelled like soot in a blazing oven and left such a stench that the monastery had to be evacuated for three days. Variations on this story had been recorded much earlier in old collections of *exempla*, but with the flair of the true preacher Ruusbroec breathed new life into the tale by stressing that his informant came from the monastery where this had happened. In telling this white lie, Ruusbroec was not trying to pull the wool over his readers’ eyes; rather, Ruusbroec’s compelling description of the everlasting ordeals of hell served to underline his message: ‘And if the glory of God cannot attract you, at least let the pains of hell terrify you, so that you leave your sins behind and seize upon virtue.’⁹¹

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Brimming with religious instruction, offering a fitting *exemplum*, and concluding with a persuasive message, *On the Christian Faith* has all the marks of a *collatio*, and later readers judged it as such. Its catechetical character gave the *Faith* a textual history all its own, quite different from Ruusbroec’s other works. His portrayals of the afterlife in heaven and hell were integrated into *collationes* on the ‘glories of heavenly bliss’ (*glorien der hemelscher salicheit*) and the ‘terrible torments of hell’ (*gruweliker pinen der hellen*). In the oldest manuscript of the *Faith*, the text is immediately followed by a description ‘of the torments of hell’ (*vander helscher pinen*). An adulterated version of the *exemplum* concerning the three

⁹¹ See *Faith* 406–08 (‘Ende en can u die glorie gods niet getreken, laet u doch die helse pine ververen op dat ghi die sonden laet ende doechde ane gript’) and 357–69 for the *exemplum*. On this subject, see De Vooy 1926, pp. 301–04. Regarding the tradition Ruusbroec drew upon for the *Faith*, see Warnar 1995a, p. 183, n. 27, and the literature listed there (esp. Troelstra 1903, pp. 183–97 and 250–60). Cf. Warnar 1993a on catechetical literature.

monks recurred, even before the end of the fourteenth century, in a sermon on the Last Judgement, and in 1413 the *Faith* was copied as an appendix to a catechetical compendium that ends with a series of chapters on the Last Judgement. Geert Grote advised his friend Jan ten Water to make a close study of Ruusbroec's work, in order to overcome once and for all his persistent longing for worldly things.⁹²

Yet the question arises of whether the *Faith* could have served as a model for Ruusbroec's edifying talks. Pomerius maintained that the lay brothers forgot the time of day and their need for sleep when listening to the mystic, but the idea that Ruusbroec captured his confrères' attention with frightening fire-and-brimstone sermons is somewhat at odds with the image of Groenendaal as an advanced school of mysticism. On the other hand, one must bear in mind that the edifying nature of a *collatio* was much less suited to the mysteries of contemplation than to instruction on how to maintain the purity of one's inner life – a matter of great importance to Ruusbroec. Jan van Leeuwen portrayed his revered confessor as someone who could scarcely come closer to God in this earthly life, but hastened to add that Ruusbroec also instructed his pupils in 'the common means and correct mode of the holy churches'. The time spent learning about morals and customs was certainly not wasted.⁹³

With characteristic frankness Van Leeuwen confessed that once he had almost kissed a woman on the mouth 'as a result of weak carnal proclivities' (*overmids crancke vleeschelike neychlicheit*). To his shame he added 'that, already embracing the woman, my mouth approached her cheek' (*dat minen mont ghenaecte aen haer wanghe, al helsende dwijf*). This was a serious matter, and its piquancy is heightened by the knowledge that when he committed this *faux pas* Jan van Leeuwen had already been in Groenendaal for about six years. If Ruusbroec ever voiced his opinion of the incident, it was only to his pupil, but the episode might explain why, in the *Tabernacle*, Ruusbroec discusses the dangers of unbridled passion, though naturally only in the most general of terms: 'If our bodily nature is contrary and in opposition to our spirit, then we cannot offer

⁹² Deschamps 1960–61, pp. 213–30 and Hoffmann 1994, p. 223, n. 55, on the excerpts in the *collationes*; exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 51, regarding the combination with *Vander helscher pinen* (*On the Infernal Torments*); Zielemans 1978, pp. 306–07 and De Vries 1949, p. 28, on the *exemplum* in a sermon; De Baere 1987 on the *Faith* in the catechetical compendium. See Epinay-Burgard 1970, p. 137, with regard to Geert Grote.

⁹³ De Vreesse 1895, p. 180: 'dat ghemeine middel ende effene wise der heilegher kerken'.

it to God patiently and innocently and with ardent hot lustiness to God. And thus we are poor and powerless over our senses. And such poverty comes at times from careless contact (*onbehoedder wandelinghen*), or from old habits of sin, or sometimes from great temptation by the enemy, or from an innate unchaste inclination which is in some people by nature.⁹⁴

That Ruusbroec here – and elsewhere – speaks out about natural urges does not imply that spiritual life in the Zonien Forest was threatened on a large scale by ‘unchaste fantasies and images’ (*onsuwere fantasie ende beelden*). It is impossible to distil Ruusbroec’s talks from his writings with any degree of certainty. Pomerius suggested that there was a clear difference between the spoken and the written word by first describing in a separate chapter ‘how excessive the prior tended to be in his *collationes* by the grace of God’, and then explaining in a new chapter ‘in what a curious manner he was accustomed to dictate his books’. Nevertheless, we should not dwell too much on what was perhaps merely a compositional device employed by Pomerius. In texts such as the *Tabernacle*, Ruusbroec does indeed present himself as the teacher he must have been in daily life in Groenendaal.⁹⁵

Large sections of the *Tabernacle* radiate the pedagogical atmosphere of monastic instruction, owing in part to the frequent use of the first person plural. The text was patterned after the common teaching method of the *lectio*: biblical exegesis based on standard works such as the *Historia scolastica*. Written commentaries were often based on spoken discourse, even though in a painstakingly polished text the oral subtext was no longer visible to the naked eye. Accordingly, we have every reason to suppose that the *Tabernacle* was connected with Ruusbroec’s monastic teaching. This is also suggested by the fact that excerpts from his work have been preserved in the middle of texts used in oral instruction, such as a collection of sermons and a lectionary. One manuscript even contains an excerpt from the *Tabernacle*, translated into Latin and

⁹⁴ Geirnaert & Reynaert 1993, p. 190, for Van Leeuwen’s kiss. *Tabernacle* 5:3712–19: ‘Eest dat onse lijfleke nature contrarie ende wedervechtende es onsen gheeste, so en conne wise gode niet offeren ghedoechsam ende onnoesel ende met innegher heeter ghelost te gode weert ende aldus sijn wi arm ende onmachtich onser senleechheit. Ende al selc aermoede comt bi wilen van onbehoedder wandelinghen ochte overmids oude ghewoente van sonden ende bi wilen overmids grote becinghe des viants ochte ene ingheboerne oncuusce neinghinghe die in selken mensche es van naturen.’

⁹⁵ See *Rungs* 112–47; quotation 144–45. Chapter titles (‘hoe overvloedich dat die here prior in sijn collaci plach te sijn in der graciën gods’ and ‘in wat wonderliker manieren hi plach sijn boeken te diceren’) in Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 148 and 151 (cf. De Leu 1885, pp. 293 and 295).



Fig. 9 Decoration in the lower margin of the Groenendaal copy of David of Augsburg's *Profectus religiosorum*.

inserted after an *ars praedicandi* (rules for delivering a sermon). It would have been only natural for Ruusbroec to speak to his pupils in the spirit of the great *opus* he was working on, and conversely, for him to use his lectures and sermons as the building blocks of the *Tabernacle*. There are other examples of such reciprocal recycling: the Franciscan friar David of Augsburg wrote in the introduction to his *Profectus religiosorum* that even though he had taken the material of the text from his talks, one of his reasons for writing the work was to make it easier to find themes for his sermons.⁹⁶

The *Profectus*, a classic work on monastic virtues, stemmed from the constant cross-fertilisation between *collatio*, *lectio*, sermon and book. Anyone seeking to form a concrete idea of this interplay between the spoken and the written word should study the illustration on the first page of the Groenendaal *Profectus*. On the left sits the teacher/author, recognisable by the scroll bearing his notes. The disciple seated opposite him studies his work. In the second scene the recorded text is explained and discussed with studious novices in white habits. At the far right, the author tutors a lay brother. The Groenendaal origin of the manuscript makes it tempting to interpret this *mise-en-scène* of monastic teaching as a locally inspired depiction of Ruusbroec in the midst of his disciples. This identification is not totally unfounded, but the miniature is particularly noteworthy because it depicts the lively literary culture at Groenendaal, where the hermitage had meanwhile grown into a centre of erudition revolving around Ruusbroec.

⁹⁶ See Huisman 1997, pp. 185–98 (lectionary with excerpts from the *Tabernacle* on fols. 032v and 187r); Lieffinck 1936, pp. 118–19 (*Tabernacle* amidst sermons); Tiele 1887, vol. I, no. 373 (*Tabernacle* in Latin). Cf. Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 346, on the use of the *Tabernacle* as material for public reading and for inclusion in sermons. See also a chapter from the *Beguines* on the sins of the clergy against the *vita apostolica* appearing in what is admittedly a sixteenth-century translation by Surius as *Collatio praelatorum ecclesiae istorum temporum cum illis, qui primitivae ecclesiae praefuerunt* (*Beguines* 2b, 1294–95 of the Latin translation). See Bataillon 1986 on the interaction between *collationes*, commentaries and sermons. See further Smalley 1952, pp. 200–02 and Carruthers 1994, pp. 208–10 and 231–39, for a description of the comparable genesis of *De arca Noe morali* by Hugh of St Victor. See also Smalley 1968, pp. 38–39, on the Leviticus commentary by Radulphus Flaix, on which the author worked for six years, meanwhile using the material for instruction.

CHAPTER V

THE GOOD PRIOR

1. Scholars in Groenendaal

The sudden death of Frank de Zedelere on 28 April 1401 was a sad loss for Groenendaal. An especially expert scribe, he had provided ample proof of his skill in his copy of the *Profectus*, and he had enriched the monastery's library with three choir psalters and two graduals. Zedelere's confrères also remembered him for his selflessness, a virtue which ultimately proved fatal. In addition to his time-consuming work as a scribe, Zedelere made himself useful as a nurse, and he continued this work when a serious epidemic, which had claimed two lives in Groenendaal in as many days, made most of the brothers wary of visiting the infirmary. But Zedelere's fear of infection was outweighed by his sense of duty: 'If I flee my brothers on earth, how can I expect to have any friends in the hereafter?'¹

These words were recorded by Sayman van Wijc, who kept an *obituarium* of the community in Groenendaal at the beginning of the fifteenth century. His book is a mine of information on monastic life in Ruusbroec's day. Those who want a more complete picture should also consult another book by Van Wijc: the inventory of the goods belonging to Groenendaal, based on its archives, which consisted of two chests containing around a thousand documents and legal instruments. Van Wijc's two books supplement each other beautifully. Unfortunately, only part of the inventory has survived, yet it contains enough information to serve as a reliable source for a factual history of Groenendaal. The information Van Wijc supplied in his *obituarium* is historically less reliable, but its interpretation of events tells us more about Ruusbroec's milieu during his time as prior.²

¹ Dykmans 1940, p. 163–64.

² Edition of Van Wijc's *obituarium* with introduction in Dykmans 1940. See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 36 and 37, and cf. Huyghebaert 1972, pp. 39–40. For the inventory, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 15.

In this respect the picture painted of Zedelere, who must have known the mystic personally, is fairly representative. The priestly ideal of the pioneers in the Zonien Forest gradually became encapsulated within a monastic culture of religious erudition and the glorification of such typical virtues as humility and charity. This development had begun as soon as Coudenberg reorganised the community of priests, turning it into a priory, or house of canons regular. According to Brother Gerard, at least eight people joined the community at that point. Bearing this in mind, if we consult the list of Groenendaal canons, we find that in 1350 the community welcomed into its midst Walter van Heist, alias Neve, Hendrik Bondewijn, Jan van Cureghem, Jan Fracijs, Reinier vanden Dale, Amelricus Taye, Jan Stoever, Jan van Op ter Brugghen and Willem Jordaens. After this, there were no more newcomers for a while. An unknown canon from Nijvel withdrew on the day of his arrival, and *magister* Everard van Oppendorp left to join the Dominicans of Louvain almost immediately after taking his vows. Next on the list is Godfried Wevel, who in any case did not join the community until after 1354. Zedelere, the fifteenth canon, perhaps joined just in time to witness the completion of the *Tabernacle*. According to annotations in the Groenendaal manuscript, Ruusbroec had largely finished the text by the time Zedelere made his profession in 1350, but it certainly took him some time to add the finishing touches.³

Ruusbroec's exegetical commentary was undoubtedly well received by the newcomers. It is possible that clerics like Zedelere were especially drawn to Groenendaal because of the atmosphere of religious learning and literacy exuded by such works as the *Espousals* and the *Tabernacle*. After all, even the illiterate lay brother Jan van Leeuwen had learned to read and write in Groenendaal, a miracle that his confrères ascribed to the Holy Spirit. For most of Groenendaal's clerics, however, contact with books was a daily activity rather than a gift of God.

A relatively large number of the first-generation Groenendaal residents set to work as scribes. This was necessary, since every new religious community needed books, especially for use in the liturgy. The missal on the Groenendaal altar of the apostles had been made by Willem Jordaens, who also copied a two-volume antiphony, as had Jan Fracijs. Arnoldus Spekaert – who died two days before Zedelere during the same epidemic – made a breviary and Jan van Op ter Brugghen a

³ De Vreese 1895, p. 9 (Brother Gerard) and Dykmans 1940, pp. 6–9 (canons).

missal, but the latter was a very mediocre scribe. Sayman van Wijk recorded in the Groenendaal *obituarium* that this confrère wrote ‘in a rather inelegant, sufficiently legible [hand], but [with a] naturally poor letter, the form of which was quite pathetic’.⁴

We are no longer in a position to judge Op ter Bruggen’s scribblings. His missal perished – possibly as early as 1435, when fire destroyed large parts of Groenendaal. The manuscripts that survived both the blaze and the subsequent ravages of time show that the brothers were capable of high-quality workmanship. Frank Zedelere designed the complicated layout of the first *obituarium*: a calendar in which the names of the deceased were recorded, so that the day of their death could be commemorated for years to come. Zedelere’s copy of the *Profectus*, complete with miniatures and border decorations, proves that book illumination was carried out to high standards in Groenendaal, even in its early days. The first brother to become a skilled illuminator was Jan van Cureghem (sometimes called Jan Spiegel), who was praised as an unsurpassed miniaturist. Spiegel’s confrères were not able to enjoy his fine work for long, though, because on 21 September 1358 he died of the plague at the age of just twenty-four.

This tragic event was commemorated by Willem Jordaens in an elegy written in Latin. He portrayed his late confrère as exemplary in every respect: modest, gentle, amiable, humble, diligent and devout, always ready to till the land and nurse the sick. None of these activities, however, could prevent Spiegel from meditating constantly on Jesus’ suffering. The young man lived in the utmost simplicity, often withdrawing to his cell to read, write or pray. Above all, Jordaens praised the deceased for his work as a miniaturist, in which Spiegel also distinguished himself as a particularly pious youth. His superb border decorations remained free of the risqué drolleries – where animals play the worst human pranks – found in the margins of even the more devout manuscripts. The earnest Spiegel was not guilty of portraying such a beastly menagerie. The novice took his vow of chastity so seriously that even the visits paid him by his mother and sisters were a source of worry.⁵

⁴ See Derolez 1966–2001, vol. IV, pp. 153–58 and Kock 1999, pp. 34–39, with more Groenendaal examples; both based on Dykmans 1940 (see p. 160 for Spekaert).

⁵ Edition of the elegy on Spiegel in De Leu 1885, pp. 323–33; on the text and Spiegel as a person, see Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 321–22 and 363–64, as well as Indestege 1974.

Jordaens interpreted the events taking place at the priory as a reflection of the ideals of religious life. We cannot derive much factual information from his text; at the most, it provides us with an early atmospheric sketch of life in a community full of expectations, pious aspirations and – if Jordaens is to be believed – almost overwrought religious sentiment. His cultivated style, which contained all the rhetorical ingredients of the elegy, is an indication of the intellectual atmosphere prevailing in Groenendaal. Jordaens was the first of a group of trained Latinists who completely reshaped the literature produced in Ruusbroec's priory. Both Middle Dutch and mysticism were gradually relegated to the background. Those who followed in Jordaens's footsteps were university-trained clerics such as the previously mentioned Jan van Schoonhoven and Henricus Pomerius, as well as Arnoldus Gheylhoven of Rotterdam. A learned jurist who had studied in Padua, Gheylhoven – who habitually quoted Petrarch – illustrated how well-read he was by writing a *Speculum philosophorum et poetarum*, a volume which does not mention Ruusbroec or any other authors writing in Dutch.⁶

These university-based Latin leanings are characteristic of the second generation of Groenendaal authors, who became acquainted with Ruusbroec only towards the end of his life or not at all. However, with the arrival of Jordaens, Zedelere and other Latin-oriented clerics, the community in the Zonien Forest had already begun to take on more academic features. Ruusbroec's position with respect to these changes is anything but clear, although we do know that he played only a small part in the professionalisation of the priory. His age no doubt played a role, for in 1350 the mystic was already fifty-seven. The younger generation in Groenendaal, however, surpassed the mystic not so much in youthful enthusiasm as in sound education. Perhaps this is why Ruusbroec, who felt his duties as prior to be a hindrance, soon received assistance from the former dean and canon Reinier vanden Dale. Immediately after his arrival, this experienced cleric was appointed sub-prior and novice master – a double function which must have allowed him to take a lot of work off Ruusbroec's hands. Moreover, if the official language of monastic teaching was Latin, the new novice master would have been better equipped than Ruusbroec for this task. This is not to say that, with regard to his spiritual progress, Vanden Dale did not benefit

⁶ On Arnoldus, see De Backer 1987 and Mann 1969 (see p. 77 for Arnoldus's *Speculum*).

from the mystic's teachings. In his obituary of the sub-prior, Sayman van Wijc referred interested readers to Schoonhoven's lost biography of Ruusbroec, which recounted the heights of perfection attained by Vanden Dale, apparently through the good offices of the mystic.⁷

Ruusbroec certainly did not hold himself aloof from the religious education of his confrères or the novices. His *Tabernacle*, which contained in its allegorical exegesis a complete architectural structure of religious life, was very useful in monastic education and *collationes*. With the same goal in mind, Ruusbroec later wrote *On Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love* (*Van seven trappen in den graed der gheesteleker minnen*). The opening words of the text sound like the opening prayer of a meeting, over which Ruusbroec presided as either teacher or preacher: 'Grace and fear of the Lord be with us all'. Ruusbroec then introduces a biblical theme (The First Epistle of John 5:4) pre-eminently suited to the instruction of fledgling clerics: 'For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, thus speaks St John.' Ruusbroec discusses how one must conquer the penchant for worldly things by means of the monastic virtues of good will, voluntary poverty, purity and humility as the rungs on the ladder leading upwards to the kingdom of God.⁸

Both the *Rungs* and the *Tabernacle* exude the atmosphere of monastic teaching that was one of the prior's duties. Both texts are less useful in the more formal instruction given to novices, for which Reinier vanden Dale perhaps preferred to turn to the *Sententia* by Petrus Lombardus, the most important textbook for medieval students of theology. The Groenendaal manuscript of this standard reference work – old enough to have been read by Ruusbroec himself – was studied intensively, as evidenced by copious scribbling on nearly every page. By way of comparison, the large Groenendaal codex of Ruusbroec's works displays only a few cursory remarks on the 122 folios comprising the *Tabernacle*.⁹

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⁷ On Vanden Dale, see Dykmans 1940, p. 62, n. 2. See Ampe 1981a, pp. 172 and 179, with regard to the remark in *De laude Brabantiae* on Ruusbroec's reservations about his priorate.

⁸ See *Rungs* 820 and 677–78; quotation 1–2: 'Gratie ende heileghe vreesse ons heeren si met ons allen. Al dat ute gode gheboren es verwindt de werelt, spreect sinte Jan.' It was long thought that the *Rungs* was also intended for Margriet van Meerbeke, and that the allegory of Christ as cantor was an allusion to her function as cantrix. See Ampe 1971, pp. 277–81, regarding the idea that Margriet is the person addressed. Cf. Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 357, n. 111, and the introduction to the new edition of the *Rungs*, pp. 13–16.

⁹ The Groenendaal manuscript containing the *Sententia* is Brussels, KB 1636–37.

As mentioned earlier, Ruusbroec's rapidly growing fame was not the least of the inducements to the pious to settle in the Zonien Forest. Among their number were 'great noble and learned persons, clerics and masters, young and old'. Pomerius suggests that in this respect Groenendaal resembled the chapter and monastery schools, where charismatic masters prompted an influx of pupils from far and wide. This was probably no exaggeration: Geert Grote spent some time in Groenendaal to learn from Ruusbroec's spiritual exercises, philosophy of life 'and his teachings and talks' (*ende sine leeringhe ende sermone*).¹⁰

Yet the comparison with school falls short of reality. While the masters immersed themselves and their pupils in the intellectual adventure of *quaestio* and *disputatio*, Ruusbroec's efforts were aimed at finding the single truth of God's presence. In *The Spiritual Espousals* he had already distanced himself explicitly from those who were 'very subtle in words, and skilful in showing lofty things'. It is not without contempt that Ruusbroec contrasts the pedant with the person illuminated by God. The latter is onefold, resolute and free of illusions, whereas subtle minds are 'full of speculations and considerations' (*vol studerens ende ghemercks*) and entangled in contradictory arguments, which only cause them to stray further from divine truth.¹¹

These words were repeated verbatim by Johannes Tauler in his own sermons. This German Dominican, whom we encountered earlier as the spiritual leader of the *Gottesfreunde* in Basel and Strasbourg, was referred to by Pomerius as a 'great doctor in divinity'. Nevertheless, Tauler took Ruusbroec's disparagement of academic learning to heart. According to Pomerius, Tauler had come to Groenendaal hoping to experience 'true wisdom and teaching' (*gewariger wijsheit ende lere*). If that is so, Tauler's wish came true. He accepted the teachings of the Groenendaal mystic, who made him realise that erudition without inspiration is of no value on the path to perfection.¹²

This message was not so eagerly accepted by all the 'doctors and other great clerics' who sought out Ruusbroec. Pomerius tells of two 'clerics from Paris', presumably members of the Brussels confraternity of

¹⁰ Verdeyen 18981b, p. 152; anecdote concerning Geert Grote in De Vreese 1895, p. 262.

¹¹ *Espousals* b1223 ff: 'herde subtijl sijn van woorden ende behendich te bewisense hoghe dinghe'.

¹² On Pomerius, see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 152 (cf. De Leu 1885, p. 296; in the Latin version Tauler has been corrupted to Canclaer); see Warnar 2002b regarding Tauler in Groenendaal.

former Paris students. They were drawn to Ruusbroec out of *curiositeit*: a kind of intellectual curiosity tainted by self-satisfaction. The mystic had little regard for these arrogant students. Their request for a word to the wise was greeted with: 'You are as holy as you wish' ('*Ghi sijt alsoe heylich als ghi wilt*'). The offended clerics complained to the other Groenendaal brothers, and only after they had intervened was Ruusbroec prepared to explain his words: faith and virtuousness depended on the will to live piously. The 'clerics from Paris' went home edified, but Ruusbroec's bad-tempered reaction says a lot about his aversion to intellectual self-conceit.¹³

Matters were more complicated in the case of the visits paid to Ruusbroec by the renowned Geert Grote, introduced by Pomerius as the 'source and origin of the new devotion (*devotio moderna*) in the Netherlands'. As soon as news reached Grote of Ruusbroec's 'great devotion and lofty teachings' (*grote devocie ende hoge lere*), he travelled in the company of the Zwolle schoolmaster Jan Cele to Groenendaal, where Grote was deeply impressed by the mystic. Nonetheless, he remained wary of Ruusbroec's views of a union with God. Undaunted, Grote took the mystic to task on the subject: 'Father, it surprises me greatly that you made so bold as to write about such lofty matters. Many great scholars, who do not understand your books, are also amazed by them, and some disagree with you.' Ruusbroec tried to set his visitor's mind at rest by assuring him that he had not written a single word without being lighted by the Holy Spirit, but this may have done little to dispel Grote's reservations.¹⁴

Grote adhered – more so than Ruusbroec – to the letter of theology. This was probably due to Grote's academic background, but his timidity was primarily a question of personal choice. He preferred to put his faith in the collective foundations of the Christian doctrine of salvation rather than trust to Ruusbroec's individual theories about the divinely inspired religious life. Moreover, Grote thought it very unfortunate that Ruusbroec wrote in Dutch. The early ideologues of the *Devotio Moderna* objected strongly to books on theology in the language of the undiscerning laity. This led to an ambivalent attitude towards mystical spirituality in general and Ruusbroec's texts in particular. Illustrative of Grote's mixed feelings was his Latin translation

¹³ Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 147–48 (De Leu 1885, pp. 292–93).

¹⁴ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 143 (De Leu 1885, p. 289). On Geert Grote and Ruusbroec, see Epiney-Burgard 1970, pp. 104–41.

of the *Espousals*. Not only did he transfer Ruusbroec's mysticism into the world of learning, but he also did his utmost to temper all kinds of overly bold statements.¹⁵

Grote, incidentally, translated the *Espousals* from a Middle Dutch text in which Ruusbroec's words had already been toned down. This revised edition is sometimes attributed to Geert Grote himself, who – whether or not in preparation for his translation – was said to have smoothed out a few unorthodoxies in his own copy of the *Espousals*. The text's history is more complicated than that, however. The second Middle Dutch version of the *Espousals* accounts for approximately half of all the surviving manuscripts. This is at odds with the idea of Grote's revising the text for private use. Furthermore, there is an indication we cannot ignore that the revision came from within Groenendaal itself. The second version invariably has the same title in the manuscripts – 'the adornment of the spiritual espousals that Jan van Ruusbroec, priest at Groenendaal near Brussels, made in the Dutch language' (*die cierheit der geesteliker brulocht die haer Jan van Ruschebroec, pape te Gronedale bi Brusele, maecte in duytscher tale*). This was most likely the title given to the *Espousals* in the large Groenendaal manuscript of Ruusbroec's collected works. A possible explanation for this enigmatic title (after all, Ruusbroec wrote the *Espousals* while still in Brussels) is to be found in a letter from Geert Grote to the brothers of Groenendaal, in which he informed them that theologians had voiced criticism of the *Espousals* and urged them to amend the text. The Groenendaal worthies perhaps decided at that time to touch up the *Espousals* on the basis of Grote's proposed improvements.¹⁶

It would not have been the first time that Ruusbroec's confrères had meddled with his texts. Earlier on, Willem Jordaens had translated the *Espousals* into Latin. He did this in the name of Ruusbroec, whose involvement in the project was minimal, even though it was exceptional

¹⁵ On Grote's revision of the *Espousals*, see Alaerts 1985, largely in agreement with Epiney-Burgard 1970. See Staubach 1997 regarding the attitude of the *Devotio Moderna* to texts in the vernacular. Edition of Grote's translation of the *Espousals* in Hofman 2000. On Ruusbroec's influence on the thinking of Geert Grote, see also De Baere 1985.

¹⁶ The conclusion, based on the title given to the *Espousals* in the Groenendaal manuscript, that the *Espousals* should be given a later dating (see Kienhorst & Kors 2001) is implausible in the light of the second version. On the letter by Geert Grote, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 31; edition in Mulder 1933, pp. 207–09. See Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 287–91, regarding the possibility that works by Ruusbroec were supposedly edited later on in Groenendaal (p. 289 on the *Espousals*, where it is even suggested that Jordaens made use of the second version). See Ampe 1975b for a refutation of Axters's comments concerning a supposed interpolation in the *Stone*.

for Middle Dutch literature to cross the cultural divide and enter the world of Latin scholarship. Indeed, Jordaens's translations of the *Espousals*, *Stone*, *Tabernacle* and *Rungs* represented a whole new chapter in the history of Middle Dutch literature. Jordaens was a talented Latinist, whose masterpiece was his translation of the *Espousals*. The Latin text travelled as far as Italy, and was the first of Ruusbroec's works to reach the printing press. Its international dissemination was probably exactly what Jordaens had been hoping to achieve. In a dedicatory letter included with his translation, he addressed the Cistercians of Ter Doest, near Bruges, suggesting that Flemish monks could not understand all the fine points of the Brabantine *Espousals* and would therefore much rather read the work in their familiar Latin. This reasoning does not provide a very convincing explanation for the translation, since the Dutch dialects of Flanders and Brabant were very similar. Ruusbroec's texts were admittedly given scant reception in what was then a more Francophone Flanders, but it is highly unlikely that the Flemings' knowledge of Dutch was so slight that the supposed language barrier could be breached only by Latin. The core of Jordaens's rhetorically embellished letter is his remark that the Cistercians had encountered in Ruusbroec's work 'a superabundance of hidden sweetness, which deserves to be spread by the bright light of a Latin translation'. The Cistercians of Ter Doest formed a committee of recommendation to increase the prestige of the Latin *Espousals*. A number of other medieval texts were sent out into the world in similar fashion, bearing a personal dedication, for the same reason that publicity agents nowadays choose an important person to be presented with the first copy of a book. The impetus for a Latin translation of the *Espousals* came from Groenendaal, and the brothers gladly made use of the appreciation expressed in elite monastic circles to bring the book to the attention of the scholarly world – in contrast to Geert Grote's Latin translation of the *Espousals*, which seems to have been made with the express purpose of removing the text from the world of the vernacular.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Jordaens is quoted from the Dutch translation of the letter according to Verdeyen 1981a, p. 84. Jordaens's translation has recently been edited (see Schepers 2004). For what may have prompted the translation, cf. De Baere 1993, pp. 159–60 and Wackers 1996a, p. 29. See also Brother Gerard's prologue in De Vreese 1895, p. 10. See Ampe 1975a, pp. 376–85, regarding the earliest printing in Paris. On the Italian manuscripts, see Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 329–30.

The Latin translations of Ruusbroec's works show how the mystic was cherished within a Groenendaal sphere of erudition in which he himself took little part. Whether it involved the resident canons, visitors or interested third parties, Ruusbroec had little enthusiasm for the purely intellectual culture of Jordaens and his associates. He considered Tauler a kindred spirit, but had practically snubbed the 'clerics from Paris'. Ruusbroec managed to avoid discussion with Geert Grote, and there are no signs that he played a very active role in the monastic education at Groenendaal. The Latin translations, by means of which Ruusbroec entered the world of scholarship, interested him only moderately, and he detested the intellectualism and bickering of the theologians, which in his view led only to pride and conceit. In his last work, the *Beguines*, Ruusbroec wrote the following verse:

Those who battle pride with true humility
are surely Bachelors of theology.
But Masters candidates must override
and trample underfoot improper pride.

*Die met oetmoede striden jeghen hoverdien
dat sijn baecseleere in theologyen.*

*Maer sullen si den strijt verwinnen ende meester werden
si moeten de hoverdie onder voete terden.*¹⁸

It was a lesson in humility that Geert Grote, a *baccalaureus*, could well take note of, but among Ruusbroec's confrères it was Willem Jordaens in particular who must have taken these words to heart. Jordaens was an academic *pur sang*, and his reputation as a translator of vernacular texts into Latin made him the embodiment of the changes taking place at Groenendaal. His biggest success was his Latin translation of a Dutch version of Heinrich Seuse's *Hundert Betrachtungen* (*One Hundred Reflections*) on the suffering of Jesus, which has survived in numerous manuscripts and was translated back into Dutch several times. Jordaens's fame, however, rests on his translations of Ruusbroec's works, as witnessed by Sayman van Wijk's entry in the Groenendaal *obituarium*: 'The outstanding cleric he was is shown by the books on the Tabernacle, the Espousals and the Rungs which he translated from Dutch into Latin.'¹⁹

¹⁸ *Beguines* 2b/1043–45 (new edition).

¹⁹ Dykmans 1940, pp. 306–07. For the translation of *Hundert Betrachtungen* and later versions, see Deschamps 1990, p. 328 ff. and Van Aelst 2005. On Jordaens and his work, see Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 322–29; Reypens 1963, 1966 and 1967 (edition); Ampe 1966a; Noë 1993; Warnar 1995a, pp. 135 and 141; Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 83–99;

Having finished his university course, Jordaens probably returned to his native Brussels only to travel on immediately to Groenendaal, since he was still under the spell of student verse when he began in the Zonien Forest to write a dream-poem featuring personifications of the virtues and vices who enter into debate. Nor did Jordaens gainsay his academic background when, going somewhat against the grain, he traded Latin for his mother tongue in a treatise known from the manuscripts only by its Latin title, *De oris osculo* (*On the Kiss on the Mouth*), although the modern edition introduces the text as *De mystieke mondkus* (*The Mystical Kiss on the Mouth*). This singular title will be discussed later. Halfway through this work Jordaens introduced *grootmoedicheyt* (magnanimity): a catch-all term for ‘many good, noble points’ (*vele goede edelre punten*) of both interior and exterior virtues. Since the thirteenth century, *magnanimitas* had been the quality whereby scholars from the University of Paris sought to distinguish themselves as cultivated minds.²⁰ Completely in keeping with this intellectual ideal, Jordaens portrayed the magnanimous person as wise, reasonable and level-headed, someone with more brain than brawn and therefore inclined by nature to contemplation. The behaviour of the magnanimous person may impress others as unfriendly, antisocial or even haughty, but according to Jordaens this aloofness was a by-product of the desire not to be distracted from the contemplation of higher things. The magnanimous do not shirk the Christian duties of the active life, but carry out ‘lowly work with high spirits’ (*nederen dienst met hoeghen ghemoede*). Acting upon an instinctive urge to contemplate, they naturally seek solitude, as did John the Baptist – none other than the patron saint of Groenendaal.²¹

If Jordaens actually thought he would find a community of like-minded, intellectually oriented individuals in the Zonien Forest, he must have had the shock of his life when he met Jan van Leeuwen. This lay brother felt just as strongly about his own characteristic ‘humility of heart’ (*grontoetmoedicheit*) as Jordaens did about academic ‘magnanimity’ (*grootmoedicheyt*). In imitation of Ruusbroec, both wrote about work and prayer as the ideal form of the spiritual life, but they had completely

Ruh 2000. On Jordaens’s translation style, see Combes 1945–72, pp. 219–28; De Soer 1959, pp. 135–36; De Baere 1993.

²⁰ Edition of the *Mondkus* in Reypens 1967; regarding magnanimity, see pp. 27–43. See De Libera 1996, p. 18. Cf. Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 89–90, who considers Jordaens’s *grootmoedicheit* ‘as ever an outstanding virtue’. Edition of Jordaens’s allegorical poem in Johnson 1985 and Ömnerfors 1986.

²¹ Reypens 1967, pp. 32/260–70; see also 51/271–82 and 58/156–67.

different notions of the *vita activa*. According to his own account, the priory cook Van Leeuwen not only worked hard to feed thirty people but also practised ‘seven different trades’ (*seven manieren van ambachten*). Jordaens preferred to alternate contemplation with ‘handiwork’ such as ‘reading or writing’ (*lesene oft met scrivene*), meaning by the latter ‘copying’.²²

Even though they lived in the same religious house, Jordaens and Van Leeuwen could hardly have been more different. While one employed his stylistic talents for translations from Middle Dutch into Latin, the other excused his inadequate knowledge of the language of learning by arguing that even a garbled Paternoster was pleasing to God, as long as it was uttered with heart and soul. Van Leeuwen revered Hadewijch as the ‘saintliest of women’ (*overheilich wijf*), whereas a treatise attributed to Jordaens bears the title ‘On the dismissal of visions appearing to a certain woman’. Jan van Leeuwen compared himself repeatedly to the Apostle Paul, who viewed God in the third heaven, while Jordaens issued solemn warnings to mortals not to imagine that they could even attain ‘that third sight or knowledge of God’s truth, which one will have in life eternal’. Van Leeuwen pleaded the same divine inspiration that had made theologians of the unlettered disciples Peter and John, whereas Jordaens stressed the rashness of thinking that everyone could be endowed with the same grace on which Holy Scripture was based.²³

Jordaens took up arms against those who held learned clerics in contempt because all their knowledge came only ‘from books, from outside, as it were’ (*uten boecken, als van buyten*). These ‘enlightened’ individuals arrogantly believed that their writings emanated ‘from what they felt in the mind’ (*uten ghevoelene haers geests*), but in reality it was all blind conceit. That was one in the eye for Van Leeuwen, but Jordaens, too, must have had his doubts about Ruusbroec’s disdain for book-learning.²⁴

Jordaens’s *Mondkus* affords us a view of the new climate in Groenendaal, where the fascination for mysticism was increasingly confined to

²² Reypens 1967, p. 42/614.

²³ Quotation of Jordaens in Reypens 1967, pp. 101/342–47 (‘dien derden ghesichte oft kennisse der waerheyt gods, diemen hebben sal inden ewighen leven’) and pp. 62/60–64 (warning against imaginary inspiration). See Reypens 1935, pp. 31–36, regarding Van Leeuwen’s partiality for Paul. See also Axters 1943, pp. 53–54 and 109 (Van Leeuwen on the Paternoster and unlettered apostles). The title of the lost work by Jordaens reads *De reprobatione visionum quae acciderunt cuidam mulieri* (Lourdaux & Persoons 1968, p. 55).

²⁴ Reypens 1967, pp. 62/46–51.

the realm of reason and expressed only in literature. Jordaens's supple style proves that a trained Latinist was also quite capable of writing Middle Dutch prose. With apparent ease he combined metaphors from very diverse genres. From the profane *ars amandi* Jordaens borrowed the path a lover must follow: seeing, addressing and touching the beloved was followed by a kiss on the mouth. These gradations taken from worldly discourse (in which the kiss was naturally not the climax) lent themselves admirably to combination with imagery from the Song of Songs. This gave rise to a subtle staging of the religious love life of the soul, which was addressed by Jordaens in his capacity as teacher.²⁵

Jordaens had a facile pen, but it was held by the steady hand of a theologian. Despite a wealth of imagery and stylistic devices, he continued to hammer home the point that mortal man could arrive at a picture of God only through images and concepts that were comprehensible to 'created intellect' (*geschapen verstand*): 'Everything that one may understand in this life of the "whatness" of God must be in forms and comparisons that are intelligible to the created intellect according to this way of life.' Jordaens did, however, believe in the revelation of higher truth: 'This is testified to by the holy books and the holy teachers who have written about such matters in a lofty and noble way, thanks to the grace of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.' He could not consult himself in any case, for 'he who is illuminated by God should find truth without erring, and I fear I am not such [a one]' (*die daer toe verlicht waer van gode, hij soude die waerheyt bevinden sonder dolen – dies ic niet en ben, vrees ic*).²⁶

Deeply moved by the mystical but untouched by God, Jordaens's personal history is the story of Groenendaal's second generation. Such enlightened minds as Ruusbroec and even Van Leeuwen fathomed the enigma of God's presence, which remained a mystery to well-grounded theologians such as Jordaens and Grote. This was not only the result

²⁵ On the nature and composition of *De oris osculo*, see Noë 1993 and Ruh 2000. On the tradition of the kiss in mystical literature, see Carré 1992, pp. 308–22.

²⁶ Reypens 1967, pp. 92/19–23: 'dat tuyghen ons die heyleghe boeken ende die heyleghe leraers die van deser materien hoechlijck ende edelijck ghedicht hebben overmits hulpe der graciën gods ende der inspieraciën des heylighs geests'; cf., among other places, 129/309–11. Previous quotation in Reypens 1967, pp. 101/355–58: 'al dat men inder watheyt gods verstaen mach in desen leven, dat moet sijn in formen ende ghelijckenissen die den ghescepenne verstantnisse na die wijse dees levens begripelick sijn'; see also pp. 10 and 88.

of grace withheld: Jordaens was either unwilling or unable to shed his academic reluctance to surrender, as Tauler had done, to an 'experience of true wisdom'.

Jordaens remained a theologian, as did increasing numbers of Groenendaal's clerics. Ruusbroec's mysticism faded into the background, but visitors to Groenendaal were still impressed by its pious atmosphere. Petrus Herentals, prior of the Norbertines of Floreffe, sent his friend Jan van Schoonhoven a letter filled with recollections of his stay at Groenendaal: 'I was able to admire the many miraculous effects of God's grace. The rays of this divine heavenly body allow the most plentiful fruits of virtue to grow in the whole of the community and in all of its members. I saw the diligence and care of the older members for the education and devoutness of the novices, the novices' respect for the advice of their elders, compassion for the sick, hospitality to visitors.'²⁷

Herentals probably visited Groenendaal while Ruusbroec was still alive. Subsequent visitors also remembered the priory as a spiritual pleasure-garden, but those who came after Ruusbroec's death never praised Groenendaal as much as they did its first prior. The relationship between Ruusbroec and his heirs remained just as they were portrayed in the sixteenth-century painting of Groenendaal luminaries. The mystic is the central figure of this *tableau de la troupe*. He looms larger than Coudenberg, the founding father, who sits beneath a baldachin. The provost is flanked by the hermits of bygone days, including Jan Hinckaert. Alongside branches fanning out in all directions, places have been given to Jordaens, Van Wevel, Pomerius and Schoonhoven, who are surrounded by other prominent individuals in Groenendaal's history. Van Leeuwen is the only lay brother among the canons, most of whom owe their place in this hall of fame to their literary accomplishments, which is why they are portrayed holding books. One or two were remembered for their heroic deeds. Lodewijk van Velthem, for example, holds in his arms the child he tried to save when Groenendaal was hit by a flood in 1396. Tragically, Brother Lodewijk drowned during this disaster, but his body was recovered thanks to a 'manifestation of heavenly light'. This miracle was commemorated by a confrère, Lodewijk

²⁷ See Auger 1891, pp. 301–04; exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 435, and the literature listed there.

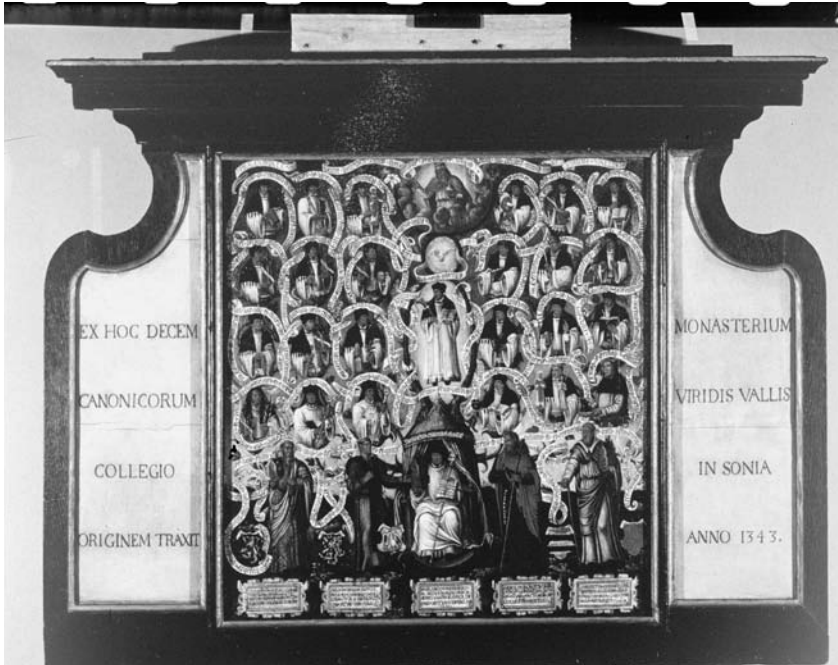


Fig. 10 Sixteenth-century painting of famous brothers of Groenendaal. Ruusbroec is the focal point. Vranke vanden Coudenberg, the founding father, sits beneath a baldachin. To the left is Jan Hinckaert. Other brothers who can be identified include Jan van Leeuwen (far right, bottom row), Willem Jordaens (to the right above Jan van Leeuwen), Pomerius (far left, second row from the bottom) and Jan van Schoonhoven (to the right above Coudenberg).

van Bivoorde, in Latin verses now unfortunately lost. Nearly forty years after Jordaens's elegy on Spiegel, the death of a Groenendaal brother had once again become the subject of literature within a company of learned clerics, who – perhaps for lack of zeal – had already begun to cultivate their own past.²⁸

²⁸ On the painting, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 188 and Reypens 1932a, pp. 56–57, n. 39, regarding Lodewijk van Velthem. See also Dykmans 1940, pp. 105 and 250.

2. The Letters, the Baroness and the Convent of Rich Clares

An important event in the history of Ruusbroec's oeuvre was the complete Latin translation that rolled off the presses in 1552. The man behind this undertaking was Laurentius Surius, a Carthusian from Cologne whose capacity for work must have equalled the enthusiasm with which he and his confrères presented themselves – at the time of the Reformation – as the protectors of the Catholic heritage of the Middle Ages. Surius's Latin edition of Ruusbroec's works eventually made his mysticism known throughout Europe. Reprints, translations and adaptations continued to appear until well into the nineteenth century. The Carthusian's large folio volume is still of great value to Ruusbroec scholars. As an appendix to this *Opera Omnia*, Surius translated 'seven very useful letters' written by the mystic, thereby rescuing from oblivion at least part of Ruusbroec's correspondence.²⁹

Not one of the original epistles has survived. We know only partial and rather late copies of Ruusbroec's letters in their original Middle Dutch, although not in his own Brabantine dialect, and even that is an overly positive assessment of the situation. All that remains of some of the letters are scraps, written in the Low German that was spoken to the east of the River IJssel in the present-day Dutch-German border region. The excerpts, which often contain no more than a few apparently disjointed sentences, do not mention the author. These dispersed fragments would never have been recognised as the work of Ruusbroec had it not been possible to compare them with Surius's translation.

The paucity of preserved letters is especially evident when compared with the numerous copies of Ruusbroec's treatises. This is hardly surprising, for a loose leaf of parchment or paper ran a far greater risk of being lost than the quires – whether bound or not – used for a text of any size. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the only missive in Surius's collection to have survived in its entirety in a Middle Dutch transcription is the shortest one. Of the two longest letters, we know only excerpts in Ruusbroec's mother tongue, whereas each letter on its own took up more pages in Surius's Latin edition than *The Booklet of Clarification*, which is not even Ruusbroec's shortest treatise.

²⁹ On Surius and his translation work, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 398–426; De Baere 1989; Chaix 1984; Mertens 1993c, pp. 80–81. See also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 102. On Ruusbroec's letters, see in particular Mertens 1990 and, by the same author, the introduction to the critical edition of the *Letters*.

The main reason for the scant dissemination of the letters is not their material form; of more importance is the fact that these texts were addressed to one person in particular. The original letter, signed by Ruusbroec, was sent to the addressee – which in the Middle Ages meant giving it to someone who undertook to deliver it personally. If the sender thought it worthwhile to keep a copy, this was made with the idea of putting the letter into circulation some day. This must have been the intention of the brothers in Groenendaal who gathered copies of Ruusbroec's letters into a *liber epistolarum*, but this book of letters did not play a significant role in the textual tradition. Even so, this *liber epistolarum* must have been used for a letter copied much later, sent by 'a religious brother [canon] regular at Groenendaal'. The epistle, of which both author and addressee are unknown, consists mainly of quotations from Ruusbroec's works. The large part his letters play in this epistle, however, suggests that the author consulted the Groenendaal *liber epistolarum*.³⁰

Surius did not have this book of letters at his disposal, nor did the seven epistles in his edition represent Ruusbroec's complete correspondence. This became apparent only recently with the discovery of a letter written in Latin in Ruusbroec's name. Surius had to rely on copies obtained more or less accidentally, and their authenticity was not always guaranteed. An opportune exception was Ruusbroec's letter to the Cologne knights Daniel van Pesche, Reinier van Bongarden and Gobelinus Jude. All three of these nobles, who lived as anchorites with the Benedictines in Cologne, donated books to the Carthusians there, so it is quite possible that Ruusbroec's original letter found its way to Surius's monastery.³¹

The letter the Cologne anchorites received from Ruusbroec gives a third, and perhaps definitive, explanation as to why Ruusbroec's epistles found so slight a response compared with his treatises: the letter contains an extremely watered-down version of the lofty views expressed in the *Espousals* and the *Tabernacle*. Ruusbroec confined himself to simple, edifying guidelines; moreover, he did not seem the least bit convinced that the three knights would persevere in their solitary life: 'He who

³⁰ For records of a *liber epistolarum*, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 243–45. See Lievens 1960b regarding the Groenendaal letter, written by 'een religioes brueder regulier te Gruenedale'. On the preservation of letters, see Constable 1976, pp. 55–62. For Middle Dutch letters in general, see Kors 1993 and 1997.

³¹ Regarding the book donations, see Marks 1974, p. 4. Concerning the letter, see Schepers 2001.

seeks to build a tall tower of holy life with which to climb to heaven must sit down, take stock and consider wisely what is needed. For if he lays the foundations and is unable to finish the work, his building will elicit mockery and derision from the people.³²

The bantering tone of Ruusbroec's Cologne letter was not at all unusual in his correspondence; the only thing out of the ordinary is the sex of the recipients. All the other letters were sent to women: a nun, a devout maiden, an aristocratic widow and several anonymous ladies of rank (judging by Ruusbroec's remarks about servants and staff). They mostly received the same message: 'Choose Christ as your bridegroom, spurn the world inasmuch as it distracts you from God, and devote yourself in all seriousness to prayer and meditation.' Pieces of advice worded in almost the same way combine to give the impression that there was a form letter in Groenendaal, ready to be sent in the event of a request for spiritual guidance. In any case, Ruusbroec was not always able to disguise a rather peremptory tone: 'My Lady, I understand that you would like a good word from God through me, on which you can build a holy life that brings you eternal salvation.' This is not the only letter that smacks of edification on request – or perhaps at the insistence of Groenendaal's provost. Ruusbroec refers repeatedly to his community and the prayers said there for the recipients, as though the letters were sent to benefactors as a favour in return. On one occasion, Ruusbroec first greets the addressee on behalf of the provost, only afterward mentioning himself 'and also our whole community with all our prayers and all the services that take place among us to the honour of God'.³³

Even though we do not know who received this letter, we can nevertheless form an idea of her social and spiritual status. She must have been a lady like Baroness Elisabeth vander Marck, who through the good offices of Ruusbroec became, in Pomerius's words, 'so touched

³² *Letter III/8–10*: 'Die stichten wilt eenen grooten hoeghen torren heylichs levens, daermen mede clymt inden hemel, hy moet sitten, proeven ende mercken wijselijcken wat daer toe behoert. Want leet hij dat fundament ende en can hij dat werck niet volbringen, soe is al sijn ghestichte spot ende scheren des volcks.' Regarding this letter and the knights, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 33; Mertens 1990, pp. 362–65; Warnar 1992, p. 281.

³³ Quotations *Letter VI/*2–*3* and *VII/1–3*: 'Vrouwe, ic hebbe alsoe verstaen dat ghi begheert van gode overmids my een goet woert daer ghi op stichten moecht een heylich leven ende uwe salicheit in bringhe.' Regarding the uniform character of the letters, see Mertens 1990, pp. 365–69; cf., for example, *Letter IV*, 40–43, 47–49 and 59–60 and *V/1–12*, with a list of parallel passages in the variant apparatus.

with devotion from the inside' (*van bynnen alsoe beruert met devocie*) that, despite her high standing, she walked barefoot from her castle to nearby Groenendaal. Although Elisabeth must have known Ruusbroec for quite some time – her first husband, the knight Engelbrecht vander Marck, was a friend of Coudenberg and a promoter of Groenendaal's interests in Brussels – the baroness did not express her admiration for the mystic until after her turbulent marital life. After the death of the much older Engelbrecht, Elisabeth first had a short-lived affair with her former squire, with whom she eloped in order to marry him – much against her parents' wishes. The premature death of this young man was followed by another marriage of convenience: Elisabeth accepted the hand of the rich and elderly Reinier van Schoonvorst, ex-canon, diplomat, field marshal and father of nine illegitimate children. This marriage also met with resistance: fear of losing their inheritance prompted Reinier's heirs to rob their father and step-mother of a number of estates and a castle. Reinier set off for Rhodes to spend his last days among the Knights Hospitallers, and Elisabeth – left behind this time as a grass widow and beleaguered by her in-laws – probably followed Ruusbroec's advice 'to ignore the world's riches and all its adornments for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ'.³⁴

Thus writes Pomerius in *De origine*. Even though Ruusbroec's advice corresponds almost exactly to the standard message found in his letters, we have no proof that the mystic ever corresponded in writing with the baroness. Nevertheless, the person of Elisabeth gives us some idea of Ruusbroec's female followers: upper-class widows cautiously embarking on a spiritual life. Bearing this in mind, it is understandable that Ruusbroec chose to confine his correspondence to a simple message. But even though his letters do not reveal the latest state of his mystical thought, Ruusbroec's advice was more than just prose suited to the occasion. The longest letter – written to Mechtild, widow of the knight Jan van Culemborg – contains an extremely profound discussion of the place of the Eucharist in mystical life. Nonetheless, the importance of Ruusbroec's epistles consists mainly in the fact that they afford a view of a new circle of people interested in mysticism.

³⁴ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 153 (De Leu 1885, p. 297): 'te versmaden dat rike der werelt met al haerder ciericheit om die minne ons heren Jhesu Christi'. On Elisabeth, see Warnar 1992, pp. 279–80. On Reinier van Schoonvorst, see Uyttebrouck 1975, p. 732, with the quotations from the *Brabantsche Yeesten*. See Reimann 1973, pp. 30–32 and Dykmans 1940, pp. 122–23, regarding Engelbrecht, an illegitimate child of the Van der Marck family.

Long after Ruusbroec's legendary dealings with Bloemardinne, there were again women in his life – and it is thanks to Surius that we can piece together the story.

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'Recently when I was in your convent you seemed a little sad to me.' These are the words Ruusbroec wrote to Margriet van Meerbeke, a Rich Clare in the Coudenklooster in Brussels, in a letter which is notable for its personal touch, in contrast to the reserved tone of his other epistles. Margriet's sorrow had moved Ruusbroec to write a few words of comfort, which is all the more remarkable because the strict rules of her enclosure forbade him – an outsider – from meddling in internal affairs. Ruusbroec, moreover, was acting contrary to his own principles: in the *Realm* he had stated emphatically that too much individual compassion with friends and relations could be an obstacle on the path to perfection. His small sin, however, takes on pardonable human qualities in the light of the previously discussed possibility that Margriet was his half-sister.³⁵

At any rate, Ruusbroec had broached a delicate subject. Margriet's sadness, he felt, was caused by personal circumstances. Perhaps she had been disappointed, Ruusbroec told her, by 'a particular friend, in whom you placed a great deal of trust'. Such emotions hindered Margriet in her 'true practice of love' (*waerachtighe oefenynghe van mynnen*), meaning between herself and God. Ruusbroec's message was unmistakable: Margriet was to distance herself from the person who distracted her from the religious life to which she had pledged herself. She was not to bind herself to anyone who felt attracted to her 'with desire or with love', nor to 'your confessor or any person inside or outside your convent'.³⁶

The reader is easily tempted by Ruusbroec's vague wording to imagine all kinds of romantic attachments, but his prudence was prompted by more than his wish to spare Margriet's feelings. Inside convents, letters were a communal matter. Even epistles addressed to individuals were read aloud for all to hear. That was enough reason for Ruusbroec to avoid any suggestion of private correspondence. He writes explicitly that the message is intended for Margriet and her fellow sisters. Moreover,

³⁵ Quotation from *Letter I/8*; on compassion as an impediment, see the *Realm* 881–83.

³⁶ *Letter I/9–14*.

he lifts the problem to a higher plane by alluding to friendships between conventuals as a great danger to the communal spirit in convents and religious communities, whose members ‘hang together like a colony of bats’ (*want si hangen te gader als vledermuse*). Like-minded individuals huddle together as in a ‘commune’ (*communie*), causing the community to disintegrate into political strife and giving rise to hate and envy, backbiting and slander: ‘And so the monastery turns into the devil’s dominion.’³⁷

The general tenor of the letter cannot conceal the fact that Margriet occupied a special place in Ruusbroec’s heart. In addition to this sometimes gripping letter, he also wrote a complete manual of spiritual life for her: *On the Seven Enclosures*. It is Ruusbroec’s most personal piece of writing, and this fact alone is perhaps the most convincing argument for identifying Margriet as Ruusbroec’s sister. ‘Dear sister’ (*Lieve suster*): thus begins the *Enclosures* as though it were a letter. It is not only its form that places this work in the epistolary genre (which was interpreted more broadly in the Middle Ages than it is nowadays), since any passage chosen at random illustrates that the text is also a letter in spirit. The reader is addressed almost throughout in the second person singular. When this is not the case, as in several digressions couched in more general terms, Ruusbroec gets back on track almost immediately: ‘I will speak no more on this subject, but will teach my sister how she should serve in humility and in purity.’³⁸

The *Enclosures* describes a day in the life of a Clare, beginning with a humble prayer upon rising and ending with pious meditations before retiring at night. Ruusbroec also discusses every daily activity in between: attending Mass, taking meals in the refectory, working in the kitchen, serving in the infirmary and receiving visitors. When Margriet is called to the grille in the parlour to speak to visitors, she is told to receive them without ‘an eager heart’ (*loste van herten*) and with her eyes modestly lowered; above all, she should beware of the ‘gaze of men’ (*mans gesichte*). Despite the individual attention Ruusbroec paid to Margriet, it did not occur to him to make any concessions to the strict rules of the convent, which imposed a kind of religious quarantine on the Clares.

³⁷ See *Letter I*/128–40 and 134–35 for the quotation: ‘Ende aldus wort dat cloester des duvels rike.’ Cf. Mertens 1990, pp. 358–61 and Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, p. 60, also regarding the general nature of the letter.

³⁸ *Enclosures* 254–55 (‘Hier ave en willic nemmeer spreken, maer ic wille leren mier suster hoe si dienen sal in oetmoede ende in reynicheiden’), occurring after a rather more general comparison to a gold penny, which is also to be found in Tauler’s sermons (Reypens 1950a).

This gives the *Enclosures* a certain implacability. It is obvious, reading between the lines of this letter, that Margriet found her isolated life in the convent difficult to bear, but one wonders if Ruusbroec's *Enclosures* did anything to lighten her burden. What must have gone through her mind, for example, when she first read the rhyming prologue of this text? To be sure, Ruusbroec begins on an intimate note with 'Dear sister' (*Lieve suster*), but in the same line he impresses upon her that 'above all things, may God be your intention and your love' (*boven alle dinc, sy god ghemeint ende ghemint*), after which – and still in rhyme – he reminds Margriet of the vows she has taken: 'This you have promised or sworn: if you heed it well, you shall be chosen' (*Dit hebdi geloeft ochte ghesworen. Houdijt wel, ghi sijt vercoren*).³⁹

If there is one thing Ruusbroec wants to make clear, it is that Margriet must view her renouncement of the world as irrevocable, so much so, in fact, that he actually forbids her to ask after 'family or friends or anything belonging to the world'. On the other hand, it was not like the mystic to refer to the enclosure only in the literal sense. Approximately halfway through the text, Ruusbroec introduces seven inner enclosures, which give the soul the opportunity to free itself of everything and to open up to a special awareness of God's presence. The title-piece of the *Enclosures* is a concise rendering of Ruusbroec's mystical philosophy, but the interlude on the allegorical enclosures brings about an unexpected change in style within the framework of this rather pragmatic 'rule for a Clare'. Did Ruusbroec think it advisable to make up for his merciless insistence on the conditions of Margriet's life in the convent? By holding out the prospect of the mystical joy of the allegorical enclosure, he perhaps hoped to reconcile her to a future behind the grille, where the world that lay ahead contained spiritual riches and a heavenly lover. Margriet, he says, should not look back:

The prophet David speaks thus: 'Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; so shall the king greatly desire thy beauty.' Therefore, I pray you, dear sister: listen to God and to your superiors, and see and mark what they bid you, and incline your ear towards all obedience. Then the king – that is, Christ – shall desire your beauty.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Enclosures* 1–6, previous quotations *Enclosures* 453 and 460. Cf. Mattick 1986 for the publication of a Dutch translation of the Rule of Clare, originating in the Cologne convent, with which the Brussels Clares maintained close ties.

⁴⁰ *Enclosures* 258–63. Previous quotations 467–68 and 494–660.

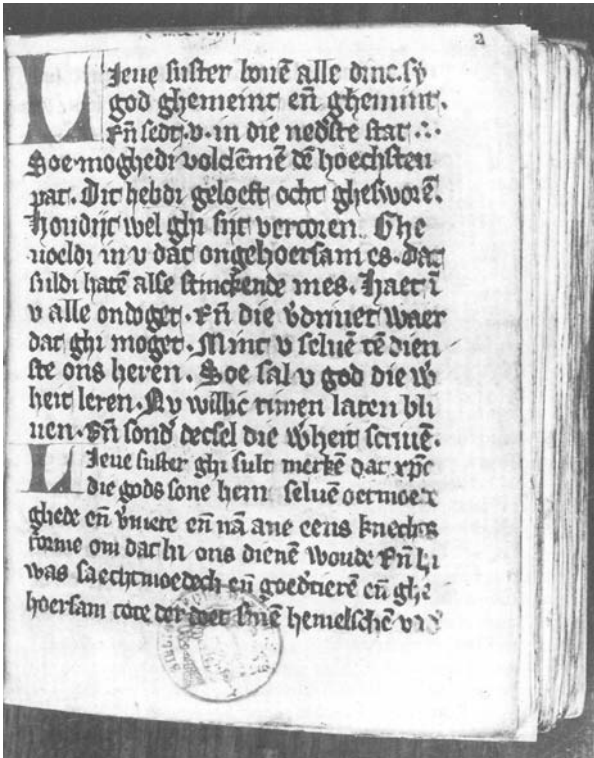


Fig. 11 Opening of the *Enclosures* in the oldest copy of the text:

Dear sister, above all else 'tis clear:
 we must love God and hold Him dear.
 From the lowest place you climb
 Upwards to the spheres sublime.
 Obey your vows, your God adore,
 Be His elect for ever more.

*Lieve suster, boven alle dinc
 sy god ghemint ende ghemint.
 Ende sedt u in die nederste stat
 Soe moghedi volclemmen den hoechsten pat.
 Dit hebdi geloest ochte ghesworen.
 Houdijt wel, ghi sijt vercoren.*

Here Ruusbroec refers to a biblical passage (Psalm 45:10–11), which in medieval writings frequently occurs in the context of entering a convent and submitting to enclosure. The same quotation is posited as the *introductio thematis* of a Middle Dutch treatise named after its

opening words: 'Hearken, O daughter' (*Hore dochter*), which discusses over the course of many chapters every aspect of the spiritual life of sisters in a convent, such as service in Church, convent, chapter meeting, refectory, dormitory and infirmary. The section 'on going out' (*van ute te gane*) does not give the impression that *Hore dochter* was written for enclosed Clares like Margriet, yet the text circulated in the same Brussels milieu as the *Enclosures*, which makes *Hore dochter* interesting material for comparison. The anonymous treatise is even more deserving of mention because the author and the female recipient seem to be in the same position as Ruusbroec and Margriet: two intimately related people who could no longer meet in person because the rules forbade it. 'For even if it were permitted for us to spend some time together,' writes the anonymous author, 'we could do so only rarely and then perhaps for a shorter time than either of us would like.' He therefore prefers a letter to a conversation: 'in these lessons and talks I do not speak to you [only] for a short time or infrequently but as often as you want and as suffices'. He closes the prologue by expressing the wish that the addressee will now reconcile herself to the situation, giving her the same biblical passage to ponder that Ruusbroec quoted to Margriet: 'Hearken, daughter, and see and incline thine ear, and forget thy people and thy father's house.'⁴¹

The unspoken circumstances which occasioned the *Enclosures* seem suddenly to be reflected in *Hore dochter*. Ruusbroec and Margriet van Meerbeke were also compelled to break close bonds: after she entered the convent, they were forever separated by the grille in the parlour. The few visits that Ruusbroec did pay to his 'dear sister' were subjected to conventual constraints. Upon taking their vows, the Clares submitted to a strict regimen of enclosure and stringent rules governing contact with their spiritual guides. If anyone other than one's confessor presented himself at the grille, the visit took place in the presence of another sister, and conversation was conducted in voices loud enough

⁴¹ See Hamburger 1998, pp. 19–21, regarding Psalm 45:10–11. On the treatise *Hore dochter*, see Van Swygenhoven 1847, esp. pp. 228–53, although the quotation is taken from the description by De Vreese in the BNM. Quotations: 'Want al waert ons georloeft dat wi enegen tijt te gadere sijn mochten, dat souden wi moeten herde selden doen ende masschien cortelekere dan deen van ons beiden begeren soude...bi deser leringen en sprekic di niet cortelec oft selden mer als dicwile als du wils ende het di genoecht...Hore dochter ende sich ende helde dine ore neder ende verget dijn volc ende dijns vader huus.' Excerpts from the text in De Bruin 1940, pp. 218–21 and 343, with the suggestion that the text was translated from the Latin.

for all to hear. This is what must have happened during the few meetings between Margriet and Ruusbroec, who does not appear to have acted as her confessor or spiritual adviser. The sisters in the Coudenklooster – founded in the same year (1343) that Duke Jan III donated Groenendaal to Coudenberg – were counselled by Franciscan friars of their order, and divine worship was conducted by a chaplain living in the house next to the convent. In such circumstances Ruusbroec had little choice but to seek contact through the written word.⁴²

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Even though Ruusbroec expressly intended the *Enclosures* for Margriet, the text became widely known, judging by the more than twenty complete or partial copies that have survived. That the personal nature of the text did not stand in the way of its wider circulation is owing to Ruusbroec's use of a monastic rule as his starting point, which might have been primarily a courtesy to Margriet, who was the convent's cantrix. As such, her duties included supervising the refectory readings (during meals), which followed a programme of sermons and saints' lives related to the days of the ecclesiastical year. The liturgical calendar left enough room, however, for a selection of other works – most certainly the monastic rule and perhaps, naturally following from this, related texts such as the *Enclosures*. The book contains sections on community life, attending Mass, caring for the sick, associating with visitors and refectory etiquette – information which so closely reflects what any Clare ought to know that it seems as though Ruusbroec wrote these passages in order to supply Margriet with material suitable for reading at table.⁴³

If the *Enclosures* was in fact used for this purpose, it certainly reached a much wider audience than merely Margriet and her fellow sisters. Duchess Johanna of Brabant and her ladies-in-waiting were regular visitors to the Coudenklooster, where two illegitimate daughters of her father, Duke Jan III, had joined the order. Johanna had obtained permission to visit her half-sisters, and had also been given papal consent

⁴² On the history of the Coudenklooster, see Juvyns 1964 and Roggen 1995, pp. 82–93. See Roggen 1995, p. 86, for the chaplain's house. See Juvyns 1964, p. 131, with regard to the first confessor of the Clares. See Mattick 1986, pp. 159–60, for the rules regarding visitors and p. 156 about the chaplain.

⁴³ On Margriet, see Huyben 1931, pp. 120–24. On the cantrix and the refectory readings, see Scheepsma 1997, pp. 65–69. Cf. *Enclosures* 258–493 for the above-mentioned chapters.

to attend Mass and Divine Office in the convent, in the company of twelve of her ladies-in-waiting. Provided they never spent a night in the convent, they were even allowed to take meals there. If Margriet were so bold as to choose passages from the *Enclosures* for the refectory reading when such noble visitors were present, she doubtless played a key role in Ruusbroec's growing popularity among women.

For more than one reason the Coudenklooster deserves our attention as the link between Ruusbroec and the aristocratic ladies to whom he wrote letters. Owing to their contacts with the court, the Brussels Convent of Rich Clares had a distinctly elite entourage, and it is in the circle of Duchess Johanna and her ladies-in-waiting that we must seek Ruusbroec's female disciples. The Rich Clares followed a monastic rule which, despite strict enclosure, nevertheless recognised the right to own property. This certainly goes some way to explain why the spirituality behind the grille exerted an attraction on women of rank, one of whom was the previously mentioned Baroness Elisabeth vander Marck. Through her marriages she had climbed to the highest court circles in Brabant. Elisabeth's third husband, Reinier van Schoonvorst, was portrayed in contemporary Brabantian chronicles as the most prominent adviser to Duke Wenceslas, whose wife was Johanna of Brabant. Perhaps Elisabeth accompanied Johanna on one or more visits to the Coudenklooster, but her interest in the Clares had been aroused by Ruusbroec himself. If Pomerius is to be believed, the baroness joined the Clares in Cologne on Ruusbroec's advice.⁴⁴

In the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for a woman whose husband had died to retire from public life and devote herself to religion. This was true, for example, of Mechtild, Jan van Culemborg's widow, to whom Ruusbroec sent his longest letter. Biographical information on this lady is extremely scarce, but it looks as though, after the death of her husband, she entered a religious house in Arnhem, a city in the Duchy of Gelre. We do not know why this particular lady enjoyed the privilege of receiving Ruusbroec's most profound letter. Groenendaal was a long way from Arnhem. Political friction between the duchies of Gelre and Brabant, which culminated in 1371 in the Battle of Baesweiler, certainly did nothing to facilitate contact between Mechtild and

⁴⁴ Regarding Johanna's visits, see Juvyns 1964, pp. 133–34 (on Willem van Duvenvoorde, the wealthy and powerful founder who wielded great influence over the duke of Brabant, see pp. 120–23). For Pomerius on Elisabeth, see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 153 (De Leu 1885, p. 297). Cf. Janssen 1995, pp. 556–57, regarding the Rich Clares' elitist entourage.

Ruusbroec. A possible intermediary was Maria of Brabant, a sister of Duchess Johanna and the wife of Reinoud III, Duke of Gelre, who counted Jan van Culemborg among his liegemen. When Maria became a widow, she returned home to her hereditary estate at Turnhout in Brabant. From there Maria maintained close ties with Ruusbroec's priory through her confessor, Godfried Wevel, a canon of Groenendaal. Perhaps, too, she accompanied Duchess Johanna on her visits to the Coudenklooster, where their half-sisters were living. Another lady who might have been involved in this epistolary tradition was Maria's sister-in-law, Mechteld of Gelre, since 1368 the widow of Count Jan of Cleves, who had also declared his allegiance to Reinoud III. After the death of her husband, this Mechteld laid claim to properties in Mechelen inherited through her mother. Her claims were supported by Duchess Johanna, with whom Mechteld kept up a lively correspondence.⁴⁵

All things considered, one gets the impression that Ruusbroec's letters circulated within a small network of religiously inclined widows from the higher circles of society and in the equally elitist convents of Rich Clares. This sheds new light on an old question: to whom was *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* addressed? According to notes found in several manuscripts, Ruusbroec sent this text in 1359 to 'one of the nuns of St Clare who had long begged him for it'.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, we do not know the lady's name. It is also lacking in the Latin translation of the *Mirror* by Geert Grote, who did, however, say that the unknown Clare came from Brussels. On the basis of this information, it has sometimes been thought that the *Mirror*, like the *Enclosures*, was written for Margriet van Meerbeke. Nevertheless, this identification is seriously hampered by Ruusbroec's allusion to his correspondent's novitiate: 'But if you are still a novice, then take on the religious state and make profession in love and in true holiness.' Margriet could not be the novice addressed here, since she had already taken her vows when Ruusbroec wrote the *Enclosures* for her, meaning long before the *Mirror* was sent in 1359.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ On widows and the spiritual life, see Hasenohr 1986. On Mechtild as the wife of the knight Jan van Culemborg, see Dek 1970, col. 88. Regarding Maria of Brabant, see Uytendbrouck 1975, pp. 49–51 and Jansen 1905, vol. 1, pp. 74–91; cf. Dykmans 1940, p. 328. Duchess Johanna was also well-disposed towards the brothers of Groenendaal; thanks to her generosity, they were able in 1378 to build a new church and enlarge the priory (Jansen 1943, p. 48). On Mechteld of Gelre, see Jungman 1990, pp. 114–16.

⁴⁶ See *Mirror* variants to the title: 'enre nonnen van sunte Claren die hem langhe daer om ghebeden hadde'.

⁴⁷ Regarding the recipient of the *Mirror*, see Ampe 1971 (p. 259 on the statement in a translation by Geert Grote), but cf. Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 357, n. 111. Quotation

In that year, though, Margriet and her fellow sisters were still waiting for the long-expected profession of Elisabeth van Heverlee, a native of Brussels. After the death of her husband, the knight Gerard van Coekelbergh, Elisabeth made lengthy preparations to enter the local Brussels Convent of Rich Clares. The documents suggest, however, that it was 1364 before this hesitant widow embraced the religious state, so she may well have been the Clare who had 'long begged' Ruusbroec for guidance. Elisabeth van Heverlee, also remembered as a benefactor of Groenendaal, fits the description of the woman to whom the *Mirror* was sent. Despite records that the recipient was a nun, Ruusbroec's words give the impression of being written to a woman who had not yet bid farewell to the world. The only monastic allusion in the *Mirror* is, in fact, the passage about the novitiate. The addressee is told to live according to her 'order' (*ordene*) and 'rule' (*reghele*), but this is decidedly different from the strict regimen to which Margriet van Meerbeke had submitted. In the *Mirror* Ruusbroec describes a religious way of life that is not yet restricted by monastic enclosure. Ruusbroec advises his correspondent to read her hours, but also enjoins her to shun the 'instability and manifoldness of people' (*onghestadecheit ende menechvuldecheit der menschen*), worldly people in particular. The woman to whom this advice is directed was not behind the grille: 'If you must speak with anyone, be he religious or lay, be circumspect, reserved and ordered in your words and in your manner, so that no one will be offended by you.'⁴⁸

Apart from the question of whether Elisabeth van Heverlee really was the Clare who had begged Ruusbroec for the *Mirror*, the profile of the intended readership gives us every reason to assume that this work circulated among the same groups of readers as the *Enclosures* and Ruusbroec's letters: the Brussels Clares and their entourage of devout women from the upper crust of society. Ruusbroec's letter to Margriet van Meerbeke marked a new phase in his writing. Up to and including the *Tabernacle*, he had written for like-minded friends of God and Groenendaal clerics. In middle age, however, he emerged as an adviser to religious women.

Mirror 26–28: 'Maer sidi noch novicia, soe nemt de ordene ane ende doet professie in minnen ende in ghewaregher heilecheit.'

⁴⁸ *Mirror* 172, 221–23 and 210–12: 'alse u behoort te sprekene met eeneghen mensche, hi si gheestelec ochte weerelec, sijt voorsienegh, behuedt ende gheordent in waerden ende in manieren, alsoe dat nieman uws ghearghert en werde.' On Elisabeth van Heverlee, see Juvyns 1964, pp. 129–30; cf. Dykmans 1940, p. 67, where it is stated, apparently incorrectly, that Elisabeth died before 1353.

3. Ruusbroec's Women

Ruusbroec was not the only mystic to have a muse. *On the Seven Enclosures* and *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* are part of a long tradition of letters, sermons and other prose in which clerics advise religious women how to find the path to perfection. According to a widely held hypothesis, the rise of vernacular spiritual literature in the Middle Ages was stimulated by the contacts between professional clerics and spiritually engaged nuns and beguines, since it was these confessors, preachers and other clerics who attempted to steer uneducated women with a penchant for mystical devotion in the right – that is to say, theologically sound – direction.

This one-sided, masculine view of things seems to ignore all too easily such exceptionally inspired writers as Hadewijch and Marguerite Porete and their determination to acquire their own place in literature – although such resolution was downright exceptional. Hadewijch was unique, both as an author and as an individual. Most women resigned themselves to the guidance of male clerics, especially when they were privileged enough to associate with an enlightened man like Ruusbroec. This is not the only reason, however, that the texts Ruusbroec wrote for women exude a certain paternalism. It is patently obvious that he instructs them in a simplified variant of his mystical doctrine, and this happens within the very conventional framework of a spiritual marriage: give Christ everything you are and have and are capable of, 'and then He shall give to you in return all that He is and all that He can: and you will never have seen such a glad day'.⁴⁹

The theme of the mystic marriage has been celebrated more colourfully by other medieval authors. In the opening of the *Mirror*, Ruusbroec makes it sound as though his primary duty is to marry off his reader to the heavenly bridegroom. Only a few lines earlier he alluded to the novitiate of the addressee, which needed urgently to be followed by profession. This attention to the formalities of monastic life characterises Ruusbroec's somewhat patronising attitude to the weaker sex. After the

⁴⁹ *Mirror* 51–54: 'ende dan sal hi u weder gheven al dat hi es ende al dat hi vermach, soe en saeghdi noeyt soe bliden dagh'. Nowadays there is an extensive body of literature on the relations between men and women in medieval mysticism, written mainly from the perspective of gender studies. See, for example, Peters 1988; Jantzen 1995, pp. 189–91, for a short and rather unreliable characterisation of Ruusbroec; Bartlett 1995; Bürkle 1999, pp. 57–71; McGinn 1991–98, vol. III, pp. 14–22; Heene 1999, with a good overview of research literature and themes. On Middle Dutch literature, see Scheepstra 1997, esp. pp. 203–21 and Lie 2001.

intellectual *tour de force* of the *Tabernacle*, it is all the more striking to what extent he conforms in the *Enclosures* to the guidelines and precepts of a monastic rule. In the letters it was the same thing all over again. No epistle lacked a disciplined sequence of instructions on the elementary principles of a religious life:

Be meek and humble of heart and the Spirit of God rests in your soul. Be benevolent, diligent and generous to all who need you. Be moderate in food and drink, and in all your needs, and you shall live without worry and care for yourself. Observe yourself and all your faults. Judge yourself outwardly and inwardly before the Truth which is God and do not judge anybody else who has not been entrusted to you; that way you shall live without resentment, anger and vengefulness of heart and you shall find peace in yourself and mercy in God.⁵⁰

These words come from Ruusbroec's rather detailed letter to Catharina van Leuven, who had to read almost to the end before she found a sentence that did not use the imperative. Ruusbroec's advice was undoubtedly sincere and well-meaning, but compared with the larger treatises, such as the *Espousals*, his tone is almost condescending. This is perhaps most striking in the way he introduces the reader of the *Mirror* to his familiar three levels of the spiritual life, 'so that you may know yourself well, and not think you are better or holier than you are'.⁵¹

When writing the *Enclosures* and the *Mirror*, Ruusbroec was not thinking of readers who had attained the same level in their spiritual life as his Groenendaal disciples. Not that there was any lack of literate women among the Brussels Clares: on the contrary, the third female author by whom Middle Dutch work has survived – after Beatrijs of Nazareth and Hadewijch – was a sister in the same Brussels convent as Margriet van Meerbeke. The oldest manuscript with the mystical-allegorical poem *Vanden bogaert die ene claere maecte* (*On the Orchard made by a Clare*) comes from Brussels, which is a good reason to seek the unknown poetess among the Rich Clares in the Coudenklooster. The Clares in

⁵⁰ *Letter IV/40–47*: 'Sijt saechte ende oetmoedich van herten, so rest die geest gods in u ziele. Sijt geonstich, vlitich ende milde iegewelken die uws behoeft. Sijt genoechsamen in spisen ende in dranken ende in allen dies u noot es, so leefdi sonder commen ende sorge uws selfs. Merct u selven ende al u gebreke. Ordelt u selven van buten ende van binnen voer die waerheit, die god es, ende en ordelt niement anders die u niet bevolen en es, so leefdi sonder antsel, toren ende wrake van herten ende alsoe vindi vrede in u selven ende in gode genadicheit.'

⁵¹ *Mirror* 107–08: 'op dat ghi u selven wel bekinnen mooght, ende niet beter noch heilegher en waent sijn dan ghi sijd'.

Cologne, whom Elisabeth vander Marck is said to have joined, were known for their manuscript production and the high quality of their miniatures. Something of this must have rubbed off on their sisters in Brussels. In any case, Ruusbroec assumes at the end of the *Enclosures* that Margriet is familiar with richly illustrated books. He instructs her to peruse, before retiring at night, three allegorical manuscripts written in the black ink of committed sins, the red ink of Jesus' suffering, and the 'fine gold' (*finen goude*) of heavenly blessedness.⁵²

The level of religious and literary culture in the Coudenklooster can hardly have prompted Ruusbroec's bantering tone in the *Enclosures* and the *Mirror*. It must be feared that the real reason lies in medieval ideas about men and women. Ruusbroec, who shared the deep-rooted belief that the weaker sex was ill-suited to intellectual pursuits, could refer to authoritative texts for his remark in the *Espousals* that the affective faculties resided in the female soul (*anima*) and the higher cognitive powers in the male mind (*spiritus*). It was in woman's fickle nature to abandon herself to the instinctive religious life, whereas the more rationally conditioned male was prone to delve into the essence of things. The modern gender debate has rejected these notions once and for all, but in the fourteenth century the supposed differences between men and women were thought to be determined by natural laws. According to Ruusbroec, their positions had already been set in paradise, where the woman, the symbol of things sensual, was subordinate to the man, 'the superior intellect whom God commanded to tend paradise'.⁵³

In daily life Ruusbroec probably encountered little to dissuade him of this view of the female psyche. As a chaplain at the Collegiate Church of St Gudula, he was part of a male world of clerics who generally had a low opinion of women and their fickleness, expressed here in a verse by Jan van Boendale:

⁵² *Enclosures* 949 ff. On the Cologne Clares and their miniatures, see Benecke 1995. Edition of the *Bogaert* in De Baere, Fraeters & Willaert 1992, which also cautiously explores the possibility of a Brussels provenance (now more plausible in the light of Brinkman 2000). For more information on the text, see Lassche 1996 and Van der Poel 1997, p. 209. Cf. Gemke 1973 regarding a mystical poem from a manuscript belonging to the Cologne Clares, which possibly originated in their circle.

⁵³ *Realm* 675–76: 'dat es der overster redenen, diere god bevolen heeft dat paradijs te hoedene'; *Espousals* b58–64. Cf. Dinzelsbacher 1994, p. 123. Ruusbroec seems actually to have based this on a passage from Rudolf of Biberach's *De septem itineribus aeternitatis* (prologue *Distinctio* III; see Schmidt 1985b).

Laughter quickly turns to tears,
 or their sombre mood soon clears.
 Childish and unschooled they act,
 spouting things they soon retract:
 they believe whate'er you say.

*Ende haer lachen ende gheween,
 dat leghet beyde bi een.
 Kijnsch sijn si ende ongheleert
 Ende met haren worden saen ghekeert
 Ende saen gheloven si datmen hen seyt.*⁵⁴

Compared with Boendale – a blatant misogynist – Ruusbroec seems to have had a milder opinion of women, but he certainly never praised their strength of mind or self-control. Women, in his view, were tender-hearted (*moruhertich*) by nature, a characteristic which in religious practice manifested itself mainly in eucharistic ecstasies during the celebration of Holy Communion. Some women became crazed with yearning for the sacrament of the Eucharist. This was a rare occurrence, to be sure, but – Ruusbroec thought – it was mainly ‘women or girls’ who fell prey to this, for they were ‘of a weak complexion and unelevated and unenlightened in the spirit’.⁵⁵

This is not the most subtle passage in Ruusbroec’s oeuvre, but he could appeal to the judgement of none other than the *doctor universalis* Albertus Magnus, patriarch of the highly intellectualistic Dominican mysticism and the teacher of Thomas Aquinas. According to Albertus, the obsession of women with the Eucharist stems from their frivolous nature: *ex levitate mulierum*. Undoubtedly that authoritative opinion only strengthened Ruusbroec’s idea that it was precisely his tender-hearted female readers who would benefit from a more detailed explanation of the wonder of the Eucharist. *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* treats the subject in such detail that various manuscripts give the text the alternative title *Vanden heylighen sacrament (On the Holy Sacrament)*.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴ *Jans teesteyne*, verses 2652–56 (Snellaert 1869). On Boendale and his view of women, see Lie 2000, pp. 83–85.

⁵⁵ *Mirror* 1128–40; quotation 1139–40: ‘van weaker complexien ende onverhagen ende onverlicht in den gheeste’.

⁵⁶ Albertus Magnus quotation in Borgnet 1899, p. 432. See below regarding the ties between Ruusbroec and Albertus Magnus. On Albertus and the history of mysticism, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. 3, p. 129.

The mystical connotations of the Eucharist were obvious, as was the fascination of women for this sacrament. Excluded from active participation in divine worship, they found the shortest path to union with God in the Eucharist, in which Christ becomes physically present in the consecrated host. The boundless enthusiasm that Holy Communion could incite in religious women had already been recorded in numerous medieval *exempla*, biographies and visions.⁵⁷

Ruusbroec commented on the female craving for Holy Communion (on the authority of Albertus), but he expressed a relatively liberal standpoint on the issue. Women and other lay people generally took Holy Communion only on Easter and a few other feast days. Otherwise the ecclesiastical authorities considered it sufficient for lay people to witness the Eucharist – taking Holy Communion with their eyes, as it were – during the elevation of the host. Ruusbroec had no objection to more frequent sacramental communion. In his opinion, even the frivolous can ‘receive the sacrament on Sunday, and also on other days if one is willing to give it to them. But if one is not willing to give it to them, that is the will of God’.⁵⁸

One usually accounts for Ruusbroec’s broad-mindedness by referring to the female readership of the *Mirror*, but his enthusiasm for the Eucharist stemmed primarily from personal involvement. For as long as he had been a chaplain, Ruusbroec had frequently experienced at first hand the effect of Holy Communion. The Eucharist was part of the Office of the Dead, the celebration of which was the chaplain’s most important duty. He performed the act of consecration almost daily, summoning up Christ’s physical presence in the sacrament and thus participating intensively in Holy Communion. This made Ruusbroec receptive to an idea that strikes us as rather odd, though it was then quite common in writings on the Eucharist, namely that supernatural digestion took place after Holy Communion. Food is normally digested by the body, but in the Eucharist the opposite takes place, so that the worshipper and Christ become one: ‘This is eating and being eaten.’ In

⁵⁷ Bynum 1991, pp. 119–50. See also the collected papers in Haquin 1999.

⁵⁸ *Mirror* 1167–70: ‘dat sacrament ontfæn op den sondagh ende oec op andere daghe also ment hen gheven wilt. Maer eest dat mens hen niet gheven en wilt, dat es de wille gods’. On sacramental and spiritual communion, see Caspers 1992, pp. 213–24 and Caspers 1999, pp. 143–47, also about Ruusbroec. For his preference for frequent participation in Holy Communion, see also Smits van Waesberghe 1943, p. 181. Bynum 1987, pp. 102 and 105, assumes that Ruusbroec’s devotion to the Eucharist had to do with the fact that he was writing for women.

the *Realm* Ruusbroec had already been gripped by this mystical wonder of Holy Communion, about which an ordained priest knew more from his own experience than anyone else in medieval society. This might explain why each time Ruusbroec spoke in later works of the effects of the Eucharist, he made pointed use of a specific set of food metaphors. In the *Espousals* he calls Holy Communion a mystical ‘dessert’ (*entelmes*), which Jesus offered at the Last Supper. In the *Mirror* he returns to the idea of a mutual devouring. Christ appears as the supreme glutton, a ‘greedy-guts’ (*ghieregh slockard*), suffering from ‘bulimia’ (*mengerael*): a hunger that surpasses all gluttony.⁵⁹

These literary figures of speech had a striking parallel in Ruusbroec’s biography. Based on the testimony of Groenendaal witnesses, Pomerius relates that during the celebration of the Eucharist the mystic instantly became ‘spiritually transformed’ (*geestelijc getransformeert*) and to the amazement of onlookers seemed to devour the host without moving his mouth, as though he were also afflicted by mystical *mengerael*. Ruusbroec’s texts show that he did not let himself get carried away in complete exaltation of the Eucharist. The transcendental essence of God defies all visualisation. En route to that pure abstraction, the mind must conquer the tangible element of Holy Communion. Those who cling to concrete images of Christ in the sacrament get bogged down by a sensory perception of the divine presence and are unable to understand ‘how one can receive our Lord in the spirit, without the sacrament’.⁶⁰

For Ruusbroec the Eucharist remained a port of entry, as it were, into the metaphysical world of his mystical theology. Before tackling such complicated subject matter, he generally did a good deal of preparatory work, and that was certainly the case here. Successive editors of the *Mirror* have pointed out its close connection with no less a source than the *Summa theologica* by Thomas Aquinas. At least as noteworthy are its parallels to the treatise *De sacramento altaris*, attributed to Albertus Magnus. A short Middle Dutch paraphrase of *De sacramento altaris*, titled *Vanden sacramente des outaers* (*On the Sacrament of the Altar*), also left its imprint on the *Mirror*. This is not surprising, especially if one considers that *On*

⁵⁹ For the quotations, see the *Realm* 1372, *Espousals* b1329 and 1334 and *Mirror* 729–30. On this last passage, see De Baere 1996a.

⁶⁰ *Mirror* 1142–43: ‘hoe men onsen heere ontfæen mach in den gheeste, sonder dat sacrament’. Cf. *Espousals* b1323–1404. See Rubin 1994, p. 316. Pomerius’s anecdote in Verdeyen 1981b, p. 160 (De Leu 1885, pp. 303–04).

the Sacrament of the Altar is ascribed to Ruusbroec in several manuscripts, including the oldest. There is, in fact, nothing to contradict this attribution. What is more, Ruusbroec's mystical interest in the Eucharist is completely in keeping with *On the Sacrament of the Altar*, which confirms the notion of mutual digestion: 'When you receive the Eucharist, you are transformed into God, in the same way as the food [i.e. the host] is transformed into you.'⁶¹

These theological antecedents are an indication of the *Mirror's* high degree of erudition. Admittedly, the priest and chronicler Lodewijk van Velthem had preceded Ruusbroec with an extremely tedious adaptation of Albertus's treatise on the Eucharist, but the rather rich Middle Dutch literature on the subject became mired in elementary discussions of what one must do to be worthy of taking Holy Communion and what benefits were to be derived from this sacrament. Complicated issues like transubstantiation were almost never discussed in the vernacular, for that would only sow confusion in the minds of unschooled lay people. In this respect Ruusbroec showed little reserve, even though he claimed to be limiting his discussion to things beneficial to all Christians. His sources and interest, however, naturally led him to theologically sensitive questions, which he announced in the *Mirror* with separate chapter headings as though they were *quaestiones* in a scholastic treatise. Ruusbroec tackles, among other things, the 'cause and explanation' (*sake ende waeromme*) of the fact that Christ gave himself in the form of the Eucharist and not in human or heavenly shape. As befits a treatment of this admittedly very academic question, Ruusbroec begins very learnedly by referring to five biblical passages, taking the reader within a single paragraph from Genesis to the First Epistle to the Romans, and from Isaiah to the Gospel according to St John. Such passages seem like the perfect opportunity to find out more about Ruusbroec's use of sources, but they also prove that the *Mirror* contains an extremely solid discussion of one of the foremost issues in late-medieval theology.⁶²

⁶¹ Critical edition of *Vanden sacramente des outaers* in Ruusbroec, *Werken*, vol. IV, quotation pp. 289/29–30: 'Als di ontfaes dleven metten lichame so werstu verwandelt in gode also die spise in di verwandelt werdt.' See Ampe 1964, p. 19, on the connection of *De sacramento altaris* with the *Mirror*. For the reference to Thomas Aquinas, see *Mirror* 658–709.

⁶² Announcement in *Mirror* 589–90; chapter headings 668, 716 and 1040. See Bakker 1999 on the theological issues surrounding the Eucharist; cf. Caspers 1992, pp. 127–230, regarding Middle Dutch texts on the Eucharist. Velthem's adaptation of Albertus Magnus occurs in the continuation of the *Spiegel historiael*, book I, chapters 54–57 (Vander Linden 1906–38) and see Axters 1937, pp. 18*–19*.

These observations do not tell us what his correspondent was supposed to think of the extremely abstract concept of ‘breadness undivided’ (*broedheit onghedeilt*) in a discussion of the complicated relationship between the concrete ‘matter’ (*materie*) of bread and wine and the higher idea, or ‘form’ (*forme*), of Christ’s body in the sacrament. Ruusbroec does not hesitate to make such weighty discussions even more complicated by extending his argument to include the mystical dimensions of the Eucharist. In a philosophical intermezzo on ‘the noblest part of our soul’ (*den edelsten deele onser sielen*) as a living mirror of God, Ruusbroec teaches the reader how the human mind, at the height of its createdness, most closely approaches its divine source.⁶³

Inasmuch as this argument contained a message for his reader, it was that the fervently desired experience of union in the Eucharist was not the highest good. Ruusbroec had arrived at the same conclusion in his treatment of Holy Communion in the *Enclosures*. Margriet was told to prepare herself for the moment – full of ‘heartfelt affection and sentiments of desire’ (*herteleke liefde ende gevoeleke lost*) – when Christ was received in the Eucharist, but Ruusbroec went on to observe that ‘if you want to practise and possess love and holiness to the highest degree, you must strip your intellect of all images, and – through faith – raise it above reason’.⁶⁴

The Eucharist is not the essential form in which man experiences God’s presence, and it was apparently women who most needed to be persuaded of this, owing perhaps to what Ruusbroec perceived as their weakness of mind. His letter to Mechtild van Culemborg follows the same pattern. There, too, a discussion of the link between mysticism and the Eucharist leads to philosophical reflections on ‘three ways in which the perfect contemplative life is practised’.⁶⁵ This was a demanding piece of writing, even by Ruusbroec’s standards. Briefly he sketches the ways in which the mind can be receptive to God’s essence and ‘is-ness’ (*ysticheit*) – yet another philosophical concept for aspects of the divine essence – and one may well ask whether Mechtild was able to

⁶³ *Mirror* 805 (‘broedheit’), 659–715 (‘materie ende forme’) and 907–69 (mystical contemplation, with a reference in the edition to William of St Thierry as the source; according to Bérubé 1991, pp. 130–31, the influence of Bonaventure is also a possibility).

⁶⁴ *Enclosures* 125–52 on the Eucharist, followed by the quotation (153–55): ‘wildi minne ende heilecheit oefenen ende besiten inden hoechsten grade, soe moet di uwe verstandege cracht ontbloeten van allen beelden ende overmids gheloeve verheffen boven redene’.

⁶⁵ See *Letter* II/35 ff.: ‘drie punten daer dat volmaeckte schouwende leven in geoeffent wort’. Cf. Lievens 1980.

understand the meaning and subtle connotations of such terms. More significantly, this part of the letter was copied into a manuscript containing Middle Dutch sermons and treatises attributed to Meister Eckhart and other representatives of the Dominican school. Ruusbroec's words seem much more at home among the writings of these highly erudite authors than in a letter that begins as a rather simple introduction to the Eucharist, with the narrative text of the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels as its point of departure. The *Mirror* reflects an identical pattern: underpinned by the same vernacular source (the Harmony of the Gospels), the writing becomes more elevated when Ruusbroec switches over to theology.⁶⁶

At the close of the *Mirror*, we see the grand master of Middle Dutch mysticism at his best in one of his most lucid discussions of the highest union with God. At this point in the text someone made a note – in the otherwise remarkably immaculate Groenendaal manuscript – claiming that here one finds sufficient proof of Ruusbroec's orthodoxy, which had been contested by the chancellor of the University of Paris. That was not yet an issue when Ruusbroec sent his *Mirror* to the unknown Clare, but the Groenendaal gloss gives an indication of the level of the text, which was very demanding for someone who was advised in the opening chapters not to confess to her priest everything that crossed her mind, whether dreaming or awake, for such thoughts could sometimes be unseemly. At that time Ruusbroec was still writing as an adviser to a beginner in spiritual life. Once he had started to explore mystical theology, Ruusbroec lost sight of her, and at the end of the text he explicitly addresses 'all you who are elevated in divine light; I do not speak to others, because they could not understand it'.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Beuken 1934 on the manuscript containing *Letter II*; cf. Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 178–95, on the copy of the Gaasdonk tracts in the same manuscript. See the edition of the complete manuscript in Van den Berg 2005. Because only a fragment has survived of the Middle Dutch text of *Letter II*, a comparative analysis of the text cannot give a definitive answer concerning Ruusbroec's use of the Harmony of the Gospels. Cf., however, *Letter II*, *113–*21 with Bergsma 1898, p. 260. See De Bruin 1935, p. 198, for the Harmony of the Gospels in the *Mirror* (cf. 551–65 and 1216–21 with Bergsma 1898, pp. 8 and 60).

⁶⁷ *Mirror* 2025–26: 'ghi alle die in godleken lichte verhaven sijt; ic en spreke tote niemene anders, want si en mochtens niet verstaen'; see 249–51 for confession; gloss on Gerson in the notes at 2148. See Van Mierlo 1950, p. 56, regarding the close of Ruusbroec's *Mirror* as being 'of the greatest significance for knowledge of his mysticism; it is like a summary of his other treatises; moreover, nowhere else does he use such clear language'. Cf. also Ampe 1950–57, vol. III, for the ascension of the soul; the indexes reveal that the author refers more frequently to the close of the *Mirror* than to the third book of the *Espousals*.

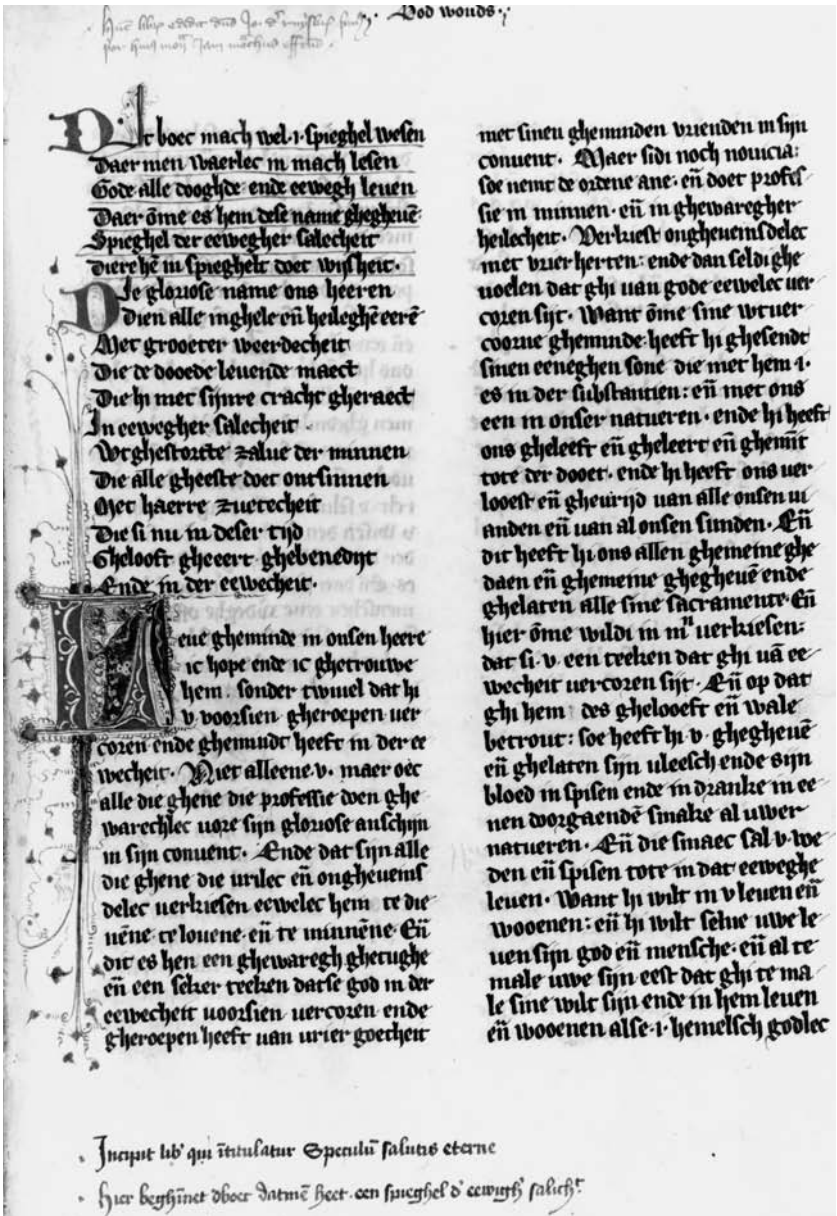


Fig. 12 Opening of the *Mirror* in the Groenendaal manuscript of Ruusbroec's oeuvre.

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According to the marginal notes in various manuscripts of the *Mirror*, Ruusbroec 'sent' the text to a Clare; the *Enclosures*, on the other hand, had been 'made' for Margriet van Meerbeke. At first glance this seems to be a trifling difference in wording, but on closer inspection it appears to exemplify an essential difference between the two texts. The *Enclosures* was clearly written with a certain reader in mind, whereas the *Mirror* gives the impression that Ruusbroec was speaking *pro forma* to the addressee. Only the opening has the didactic tone of the *Enclosures* and the letters; otherwise the *Mirror* seems by no means tailored to the supposed needs and wishes of the Clare who had requested it. It is even conceivable that she had begged Ruusbroec for a copy of an existing text, which Ruusbroec sent with a letter of introduction, for it is indeed interesting that even before the end of the fourteenth century the first chapters of the *Mirror* surfaced in a Cologne codex as an independent letter which a 'virtuous priest, Jan van Ruusbroec of the Zonien Forest, sent to a lady, to lead her to virtue'. The cast of characters – priest and lady – is intriguing. To be sure, when he sent the *Mirror* in 1359 Ruusbroec had already been a prior for ten years, and from other sources we know that the recipient was a Clare. It is not clear what conclusion we should draw from this. Did the opening of the *Mirror* already exist as a separate text? Should we view the first chapters as a kind of dedicatory letter accompanying the actual treatise, or did Ruusbroec consider them suitable for re-use as an epistle to one of his other female followers?⁶⁸

The earliest trace of the *Mirror* raises all kinds of questions about the relationship between author and reader – which in any case was much less intimate than the ties between Ruusbroec and Margriet van Meerbeke. One striking difference is that Margriet is named in annotations to the *Enclosures* whose origins can be traced to glosses in the large Groenendaal manuscript, whereas this important source does not mention the addressee of the *Mirror*.

As stated earlier, it is difficult to determine to what extent Ruusbroec wrote the *Mirror* with female readers in mind. Given the learned nature of the work, it is not surprising that around 1400 a copy was in the

⁶⁸ See Heinrichs 1962 regarding the manuscript, the identification of the excerpt and the quotation: 'Dese bryeff...sant eyn eirsam preister eyne joncfrauwen sye zu sturen zu doichenden Her Johan Ruysbroich uss Sonien'.

possession of the Dominican professor of theology Michael de Stoct. For a long time, those interested in Ruusbroec's ideas on such typically feminine themes as the Eucharist and mysticism were almost all men. Geert Grote made a Latin translation of the *Mirror*, and around 1400 the Dutch text was recorded in a list of Dutch books at Rooklooster. Several manuscripts belonging to nunneries date from the first half of the fifteenth century, but in the mid-fifteenth century it was again a man, the Bruges rhetorician Anthonis de Roovere, who took the trouble to recast passages from the *Mirror* in the form of a refrain: *Lof vanden heylighen sacramente (In Praise of the Holy Sacrament)*. It remains a matter of conjecture whether the Ghent prioress Alijt Bake, a contemporary of De Roovere, studied Ruusbroec's Eucharist treatise.⁶⁹

It is certain, however, that Alijt Bake immersed herself in the work of the Groenendaal prior. The mystically endowed prioress was convinced that no mortal could adequately describe the highest union with God, but in her view the persons who came closest to achieving this – after Johannes Tauler, whose writings she particularly admired – were 'Jan van Ruusbroec and his cook' (*Jan Ruusbrueeck ende syn cock*). Ruusbroec enjoyed the most authority, but Alijt Bake felt more affinity with Jan van Leeuwen. He, too, had suffered the spiritual torments that had afflicted her all her life; indeed, she could not understand why Ruusbroec did not write about them. Perhaps, she thought, he was afraid of being misunderstood, for she was reluctant to think that lack of faith could have caused Ruusbroec's mystical experience to fall short of hers. Apparently she did not consider the possibility that Ruusbroec preferred to base his writings on general truths rather than on individual feelings.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ On De Stoct's library, see Derolez 1966–2001, vol. III, pp. 53–71 (the *Mirror* is no. 202). On Geert Grote's translation of the *Mirror*, see De Baere 1993; the list of books at Rooklooster is recorded in De Vreese 1962, p. 65. On Ruusbroec and De Roovere, see Van Eeghem 1953. Regarding Alijt Bake and the *Mirror*, see Scheepsma 1997, p. 261, with reference to Spaapen 1967, p. 326, n. 63c. For the reception of the *Mirror* in general, see Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 356–65. For its reception in nunneries, see p. 178 of the introduction to the edition of the *Mirror*.

⁷⁰ See Scheepsma 1994, pp. 123–24, for the quotation about Tauler and Ruusbroec; Spaapen 1967, pp. 326–27, with commentary on Alijt Bake's knowledge of Ruusbroec's texts and her thoughts on Van Leeuwen's and Ruusbroec's remarks about spiritual torments and resignation. For a concise account of Alijt Bake, see Scheepsma 1997, pp. 175–201 and 251–64 and Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, pp. 252–67.

Ruusbroec's intellectual approach made him inaccessible to Alijt Bake, which leads us to the inescapable conclusion that sparks seldom flew between the mystic and his female readers. The incomprehension – if we may call it that – was mutual, for if it is true that Alijt Bake misunderstood Ruusbroec, he in turn could hardly empathise with female emotions. Inability and unfamiliarity are no doubt more to blame than an unwillingness to understand, but Ruusbroec was uncomfortable with the passionate and tormented nature of feminine writing like Hadewijch's. In the *Enclosures* and the *Mirror*, Ruusbroec quoted her texts with somewhat more ease than before, but he seldom managed to strike a tone capable of kindling religious feelings in women. Preachers like Tauler and Seuse were much better at understanding the religious women in their congregations. Seuse in particular felt close to the women under his spiritual guidance – a situation which Ruusbroec would certainly not have looked upon with unqualified approval.⁷¹

In Ruusbroec's earliest texts he had already stressed that friendships could be formed only at the expense of living for and loving God. In his letters – to women! – he wrote candidly about the dangers of affection between the sexes: 'Often something appears to be purely intellectual or spiritual which later, if carried on too intensely, degenerates completely into carnality.' In his letter to Catharina van Leuven, Ruusbroec urged her in no uncertain terms to control her inclination to please others 'by means of the natural beauty that God has given you'. Catharina was to desist from (further?) attempts to charm her confessor or other clerics with zealotry in 'a spiritual semblance of holiness in well-chosen words, in a striking manner of speech during confession, in humble appearance, in despicable clothing or in any other spiritual manner with which you please yourself'. Ruusbroec condemns in general terms such practices as the 'basis of spiritual pride' (*gront der geesteliker hoverdyen*), exaggeratedly pietistic behaviour being in his opinion an undesirable expression of feminine charm. It has been suggested that Ruusbroec's inflexibility was the result of personal experience. Or was he afraid of being elevated to the status of a mystic cult figure by his female followers?⁷²

⁷¹ See the comments on Ruusbroec in Ruh 1990–99, vol. IV, p. 69. On Seuse, see Hamburger 1998, pp. 238–78.

⁷² Quotations from the letter to Catharina in *Letter IV/17–21* ('in schoenheit der naturen dye u got ghegeven heeft') and 24–28 ('enen ghesteliken schijn van heylicheyden in subtylen waerden, in wael connen biechten, in oetmoedigen wisen, in versmeden habyt,

These fears were not ungrounded. Early signs of Ruusbroec's glorification are to be found precisely among women in Catharina's town of Mechelen. Various inhabitants of the local beguinage sought contact with Groenendaal, and one of them managed, after Ruusbroec's death, to acquire his belt, a tooth and some of his hair, which she preserved as relics. This reverence for Ruusbroec was not accompanied by a serious interest in his texts. Only in the mid-fifteenth century do we meet, in the person of the Mechelen nun Jacoba van Loon, a woman who actually demonstrated her knowledge of passages from Ruusbroec's *On the Twelve Beguines*.⁷³

The earliest reader of this text is to be found, curiously enough, not in Brabant but – yet again – in the Duchy of Gelre. Geert Grote wrote to the brothers of Groenendaal that he had given the first part of the *Beguines* to Margriet van Mekerem, a Nijmegen beguine who around 1400 had taken part in the production of a manuscript in which Ruusbroec's letter to Catharina van Leuven survives almost in its entirety. Before the death of her husband, Margriet van Mekerem frequented Gelre court circles, as had Mechtild van Culemborg, to whom Ruusbroec sent his detailed letter about the Eucharist. We have already considered the possibility that Ruusbroec's popularity among women in the east of the Netherlands was stimulated by such ladies as Mechteld of Gelre or her sister-in-law Maria of Brabant, the widow of Reinoud III, Duke of Gelre. In any case, a nucleus of women interested in Ruusbroec's work formed among this courtly entourage. Additional indications of this are to be found in the library of the Agnietenklooster at Arnhem, the city where Mechtild van Culemborg lived. The library of these canonesses regular contains unique manuscripts with the Middle Dutch text of Ruusbroec's letters to Margriet van Meerbeke (nearly complete) and Mechtild van Culemborg (the largest surviving fragment), but the showpiece of their collection of books on mysticism is the volume, most likely imported from Brabant, containing *A Mir-*

in wat geesteliker manyeren daer gi u selven in behaget'), and with regard to carnality, see *Letter V*/*4–*6. On Ruusbroec's ideas about friendship, see Vekeman 1984, pp. 134–41. Ruusbroec generally resisted *singularitas* in friendship (cf. such early writings as the *Realm* 881–92); see McGuire 1988, pp. 398–403.

⁷³ On Ruusbroec's personal experiences, see Vekeman 1984, p. 135: 'Could it be that Ruusbroec experienced more love and adoration than friendship?' On the relics, see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 163 (De Leu 1885, p. 306). For accounts of Mechelen beguines in contact with Groenendaal, see Dijkmans 1940, p. 11, n. 5, p. 127, n. 2 and p. 192, n. 3. On Jacoba van Loon, see Scheepsma 1997, pp. 95–96.

ror of *Eternal Blessedness*, followed by Ruusbroec's learned treatises *The Booklet of Clarification* and *On the Sparkling Stone*.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the female readers in the Duchy of Gelre could do nothing to change the image of Ruusbroec as a man's author. Of the fourteenth-century manuscripts with his complete texts, only one copy of the *Espousals* comes from a women's library, namely that of the beguines at Delft. It was not until the end of the fifteenth century that Ruusbroec's oeuvre was read on a large scale in nunneries. The exceptionally well-stocked library of the Augustine nuns in the Convent of Nazareth in Geldern possessed seven manuscripts, each containing at least part of one of Ruusbroec's texts. Less impressive, but just as moving, is the copy – faithful down to the capital letters and section marks – of the Groenendaal manuscript of Ruusbroec's eleven treatises, which Martine van Woelputte made in 1480 for the library of her convent 'Sint-Margriet in het dal van Josaphat' (St Margaret in the Valley of Jehosaphat) at Bergen op Zoom. It is a mystery how Martine could have studied the manuscript. One conceivable scenario is that the confessors of this convent, who came from Groenendaal, supervised Martine's scribal work, thus reducing the risk of lending out the magnificent Ruusbroec codex for a longer period of time, since it is unlikely that Martine stayed at Groenendaal for the weeks or months necessary to copy the huge tome, even though her position as the administrator (*procuratrix*) of her convent meant that she enjoyed greater freedom of movement than her fellow sisters.⁷⁵

It was a sign of the changing times that the once-treasured manuscript of Ruusbroec's collected works could leave the Groenendaal library on long-term loan. By the time Martine van Woelputte began to copy

⁷⁴ On Margriet van Mekerem, see Daniëls 1943 and Obbema 1996, pp. 162–65, also regarding the manuscript. With regard to the Agnietenklooster's manuscript of the *Mirror*, see De Vreese 1900–02, pp. 70–79 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 55; cf. Stooker & Verbeij 1997, vol. II, pp. 53–57, on the other books in the convent's library.

⁷⁵ Cf. Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 381 ff., for conclusions about the fourteenth-century dissemination of Ruusbroec's work in monasteries; see De Vreese 1900–02, pp. 459–62, with regard to the *Espousals* in the possession of the Delft beguines. Fourteenth-century excerpts from Ruusbroec's work in the possession of women include Margriet van Mekerem's copy of the letter to Catharina and several excerpts from the *Realm* and the *Tabernacle* in a little manuscript later kept by the church warden of the Brussels beguinage (exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 75 and Lievens 1957b). For the dissemination of Ruusbroec's texts, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 125–28 and Stooker & Verbeij 1997, pp. 235–41. On Nazareth in Geldern, see Costard 1992 (for Ruusbroec, see p. 217). On the copy made by Martine van Woelputte, see Kienhorst & Kors 1998a, pp. 35–45.

Ruusbroec's texts, his oeuvre had begun a second life in circles of religious women, who long remained oblivious to the rise of humanism and its new ideas. Nonetheless, the representatives of the New Age did not neglect Ruusbroec. In 1512 the *Espousals* first appeared in print (in Jordaens's Latin translation), published by the Parisian Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, a humanist and friend of Erasmus. However, this one-off edition found far fewer readers than a volume appearing two decades later – and reprinted no fewer than nineteen times, until well into the eighteenth century – namely the *Evangelische peerle* (*Evangelical Pearl*) by an unknown woman who drew her literary inspiration largely from Ruusbroec's works. By then, however, his Middle Dutch texts had well and truly become literature for women.⁷⁶

4. Highest Truth

In 1359, when Ruusbroec had finished *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, he was seventy-six years old, in those days a very respectable age. Jacob van Maerlant presented it in *Der naturen bloeme* (*Nature's Finest*) as a generally accepted fact that, after the age of seventy, one lost sight of reality and became 'old-fogyish and hazy, thinking all the world is crazy' (*(t)suffen ende rasen, Hem dinket al die werelt dwasen*). Greybeards were thought to live in the past, clinging tenaciously to their own ideas and thinking the words of others 'daft' (*dulle word*). Such cantankerousness did not take hold of Ruusbroec, though occasionally a petulant tone crept into his writings. He had never been after earthly gain, but both the *Mirror* and the later *Rungs* contain sharply satirical verses on avarice:

He who worldly goods and gold doth prize,
Imbibes the poison of his own demise.

*Die goud besitd ende mindt eerdsc goed
Hie eetd venijn dat sterven doet.*⁷⁷

⁷⁶ On the printed edition published by Lefèvre, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 376–86 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 100. On Lefèvre himself, see the contributions in Perrot 1995. Regarding the female writer of the *Evangelische peerle*, see Ruh 1990–99, vol. I, pp. 290–312. Edition of the *Tempel onser sielen* (*Temple of Our Souls*) in Ampe 1968, with information in the notes about Ruusbroec's texts as the source.

⁷⁷ *Rungs* 49–50; for the complete poem, see 49–71 (cf. *Mirror* 1596–1625 for a similar poem). For Maerlant's observations, see Gijsseling 1980–87, vol. II, verses 249–59.

This message was intended for worldly people, but Ruusbroec writes just as angrily about a monastery's internal affairs. Some monks, thinking they can do everything better and more tactfully themselves, cannot bear having a superior. Such people, full of pride and self-satisfaction, are like bellows 'full of bogus wind' (*die vol es van looesen winde*), which make offensive noises when squeezed. Pedants are also given a beating. They reprimand and preach, but never listen. They grumble and scold, hide their haughtiness behind a mask of humility, and disguise their envy by pretending to be just.⁷⁸

Perhaps it is a sign of old age that Ruusbroec gave free rein to his rancour, but it did not mean that the elderly mystic's writing days were drawing to a close. After the *Mirror*, Ruusbroec added another three titles to his oeuvre: *On Seven Rungs*, *The Booklet of Clarification* and *On the Twelve Beguines*, each of which can stand up to comparison with all the Middle Dutch prose of the period. The solemn closing chord of the *Rungs* is in itself proof that Ruusbroec was more capable than ever of expressing his fascination for the supreme abstraction of an existence in the 'modeless essence of the Godhead' (*wiseloese wesen der godheit*):

There we are all with God one simple essential blessedness. There, there is neither God nor creature, according to the mode of personhood. There we are all with God without difference, one fathomless simple blessedness. There we are all lost, sunken away, having flowed away in an unknown darkness. This is the highest that a person can live and die, love and enjoy in eternal blessedness. And whosoever teaches you the contrary, it is nonsense.⁷⁹

After the powerful sentences with which Ruusbroec summons up the transcendental condition of the mind, the *Rungs* ends on a dissonant note, even if we ignore the ungrammatical transition between the false prophets (who teach 'the contrary') and the 'nonsense' of their ideas. Scholars have previously noticed Ruusbroec's aggrieved attitude, but it has never been seen as fresh proof of Maerlant's assertion that stubbornness inevitably increases with age. The explanation has usually

⁷⁸ *Rungs* 297–99 and 710–84.

⁷⁹ *Rungs* 1194–98: 'Daer sijn wi alle met gode eene eenvuldeghe weseleke salegheit. Daer en es noch god noch creatuere na wise der persoonlecheit. Daer sijn wi alle met gode sonder onderscheet eene grondeloese eenvuldeghe salegheit. Daer sijn wi alle verloren, ontsongen ende ontvloten in eene onbekinde deemsterheit. Dit is dat hooeghste dat men leven ende sterven, minnen ende ghebruken mach in eewegher salegheit. Ende soe wie u contrarie leert, dats dooerheit.'

been the increasing reluctance to accept Ruusbroec's thought, which in his later years put him on the defensive.⁸⁰

'The prophet Samuel wept for King Saul.' As forbiddingly as Ruusbroec had ended *On Seven Rungs*, he began his *Booklet of Clarification* with a reference to one of the classic princely tragedies of the Old Testament. God had chosen Saul as king of Israel and enabled him to defeat the enemies of his people. When in the flush of victory Saul erected a triumphal arch in memory of his successes, God was displeased and 'rejected' Saul and his descendants 'from being king' (1 Samuel 15:23). The prophet Samuel conveyed this message to Saul, who begged in vain for forgiveness. Samuel turned his back on the cast-off king, but mourned his fate.

Those who knew this story – as Ruusbroec's readers certainly did – must have recognised the seriousness with which the mystic put his case: 'In the same way I can now say that we might well weep over those conceited people who think that they are kings in Israel. For they think that they are lifted up above all other good men in a high contemplative life.'⁸¹ These proud people knowingly sin against the vow of obedience to God and the Church. Their lamentable fate is just as irrevocable as the judgement passed by Samuel on Saul. Ruusbroec's words sound ominous, but just when we begin to detect signs of testiness, the prologue to the *Booklet* takes an unexpectedly benign turn:

Some of my friends desire, and have prayed me to show and explain in a few words, to the best of my ability, and most precisely and clearly, the truth that I understand and feel about all the most profound doctrine that I have written, so that my words may not mislead anyone but may serve to improve each one, and that I most willingly do.⁸²

The friends in question were the Carthusians of Herne. The *Booklet* was prompted by Ruusbroec's previously mentioned visit to their monastery. In his prologue Brother Gerard gave a detailed account of the mystic's talks with the brothers about 'his high understanding' and the compli-

⁸⁰ See Willeumier-Schalij 1981, p. 370.

⁸¹ *Booklet* 7–10: 'Alsoe magh ic nu seggen dat wi wel bewenen moghen selke bedroeghene menschen dien dunct dat si coninghe sijn in Israel. Want hen dunct dat si verhaven sijn boven alle andere goede menschen in een hoghe scouwende leven.'

⁸² *Booklet* 24–29: 'Selke van minen vrienden begheren ende hebben mi ghebeden dat ic met corten waerden tonen ende verclaren soude na mijn vermoghen die naeste ende die claerste waarheit die ic versta ende ghevoele van alle der hoechster leren die ic ghescreven hebbe, op dat minre waarde niemen vererghert en werde maer ieghewelc ghebetert. Ende dat wille ic gherne doen.'

cated questions pertaining to his mystical teachings. The Carthusians had questioned several passages in *The Realm of Lovers*, and Ruusbroec had promised to explain them in a *Booklet of Clarification*, which was to shed some light on his mystical thought. Ruusbroec's answer to the Carthusians was soon labelled a philosophical treatise: 'a pure book of the highest truth'.⁸³

The *Booklet* is described in similar terms in a fifteenth-century reading list in which Ruusbroec's works are arranged in increasing degree of difficulty: 'on the highest truth, which begins: "The prophet Samuel wept for King Saul"'. The person who drew up this list – with whom we shall soon become better acquainted – recorded the opening words in order to identify the *Booklet* more precisely, not because he was puzzled as to why Ruusbroec would begin a text announced as a favour to his friends with so vicious a reference to the sad fate of King Saul. From a historical perspective the polemical prologue deserves our close attention, for Ruusbroec's kindness towards the Carthusians makes it even more important to know which descendants of King Saul are being reprimanded in the *Booklet*.⁸⁴

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To begin with, we must take another look at Brother Gerard's prologue to the works of Ruusbroec. Brother Gerard was directly involved in the events preceding the *Booklet*, since he and his fellow Carthusians had questioned Ruusbroec about some problematic ideas in the *Realm*. The bone of contention was the statement that man felt himself to be united with God 'without distinction' (*sonder differentie*). That was impossible, Brother Gerard thought, because 'without distinction means so much as without any inequality, without any otherness, [in] all things the same, without difference' (*sonder differentie ludet alsoe vele als sonder enighe onghelijcheit, sonder enighe anderheit, al dat selve sonder ondersceit*). One could never describe the human union with God in such absolute terms; there must always be a difference between Creator and mortal. To Brother

⁸³ Quotations in De Vreese 1895, p. 12 ('sinen hoghen verstande') and *Booklet* variants to the title ('een suverlijc boec vander hoechster waerheit').

⁸⁴ See Willeumier-Schalij 1981, pp. 370–73, for a characterisation of the *Booklet*; for its mention in the list ('vander hoechster waerheit, dat beghint: 'Die prophete Samuel die beweende den coninc Saul'), see De Vreese 1895, p. 112. On Ruusbroec's visit to Herne, see Warnar 1993b, pp. 170–71 and 1993c, pp. 28–29. Cf. Mertens 1993b and 1995b, pp. 66–69 and Verdeyen 1995b, pp. 5–7. See Hoenen 1993 on the philosophical background of the *Booklet*.

Gerard's mind, Ruusbroec did not doubt the difference either, because in other writings the mystic clearly held such a union to be impossible. The Carthusian thought that Ruusbroec had regrettably used the term 'without distinction' to give expression to the most exalted form of union with the divine, fully realising that these words said more than he really meant.⁸⁵

Brother Gerard limits the discussion to an unfortunate choice of words, but matters were much more complicated than that. If the Carthusians were indeed suggesting that Ruusbroec's union 'without difference' boiled down to man's total union with God, they were implicitly accusing him of pantheistic ideas that he himself had repeatedly dismissed as heresy. Complete fusion of man and God was the kind of idea attributed to Free Spirit heretics. It must have been painful for Ruusbroec to be thus reproached at a time when these groups were again – or perhaps still – stirring up trouble. William of Gennepe, archbishop of Cologne since 1357, had vigorously resumed the persecution of beguines, beghards and other supposed heretics. In the German-speaking regions the harassment reached a high point in the years between 1365 and 1370, when many suspected of Free Spirit heresy sought refuge in the Low Countries, including the Duchy of Brabant. In 1374 groups of dancers, sometimes numbering as many as 150, descended on the Netherlands 'from the Rhine Valley', 'screaming altogether like daft fools or idiotic people'. Religious tension had come to a head even earlier, however, when in 1367 a priest had been drawn and quartered in Brussels.⁸⁶

Against the background of this tumult the hostile opening of the *Booklet* is more comprehensible, and it is even logical that Ruusbroec immediately distanced himself unequivocally from the Free Spirits, whom he stereotypically portrayed as the enemy. Ruusbroec had ushered them onto the stage in order to show his public the difference between good and evil: 'I have thus placed evil beside good, that you may better understand good and be on your guard against evil.' In this dichotomy, however, Ruusbroec did not have in mind the arrogant 'Kings of Israel' who feature at the beginning of the *Booklet*, but rather parties who could better be sought in the circle of the Carthusians of

⁸⁵ See Burger 1993, pp. 40–41 and Mertens 1993b.

⁸⁶ McDonnell 1954, pp. 557–74. A connection between these new persecutions and Ruusbroec's criticism of heretics in later texts has been suggested in Kors 1999, p. 341. For the dancers and the quartered priest, see Schayes 1850, pp. 165 and 164, respectively.

Herne: Ruusbroec's friends who had asked him for the text, as well as those whom he had antagonised in the debate prompted by his 'union without distinction'.⁸⁷

We will never know exactly what happened in Herne, but it does not seem that Ruusbroec was treated with contempt by his hosts or that he left on a discordant note. Nevertheless, the impression persists that Brother Gerard glossed over a slumbering conflict. Ruusbroec had been drawn by the Carthusians into a controversy that involved much more than mere quibbling about semantics. The discussion actually revolved around the emerging status of Middle Dutch as a language suited to mysticism and theology, a development that allowed the religious and intellectual emancipation of the lay person to gain momentum. This change was by no means welcomed on all sides. Many clerics strongly objected to making scholarship available to everyone outside the professional circuit of Latinists. Ruusbroec's well-considered treatises made an enormous contribution to that development – though not one word in all his oeuvre shows that he was aware of the sensitive issues involved in the contemporary debates on the use of the vernacular. Brother Gerard, on the other hand, gave it his full consideration. He closed his prologue by reproaching 'those who do not like to read divinity books in Dutch as much as in Latin, even though they understand Dutch better than Latin' (*enighe menschen die niet alsoe wel en lusten te studeren in duytschen boeken van geestelicheden als in latijnschen, nochtan dat si bet dietsch dan latijn verstaen*). He accuses such people of failing to pursue the 'fruits of their studies' (*vrucht hare studien*). Those who must make a supreme effort to understand a text in a foreign language cannot concentrate fully on the content.⁸⁸

If anyone could be permitted to make such a remark, it was Brother Gerard. The chronicle of the monastery of Herne calls him a *notabilis clericus* and *expertus* in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. It was precisely this connoisseur who took Ruusbroec's texts under his wing, defending them against critics who sought to fault the mystic, either because they *a priori* disapproved of Middle Dutch, thinking it inappropriate for

⁸⁷ See *Booklet* 76–160 (quotation 159–60: 'Ic hebbe u dat quade gheset bi den goeden, op dat u dat goede te bat verstaen moghet ende vanden quaden behoet wert'). Cf. Feys 1991.

⁸⁸ De Vreese 1895, pp. 18–19. On mystical theology in the vernacular in general, see, for example, McGinn 1990–98, vol. III, pp. 19–24. For the Dutch situation, see Staubach 1997.

'books on divinity', or because they believed that only Latin was suited to writing about weighty matters of theology. Feelings in Herne ran high on this score. The so-called Bible translator of 1360, probably a Carthusian from Brother Gerard's monastery in Herne, carried on heated discussions with otherwise unnamed clerics who saw no point in 'unravelling the secrets of scripture for the common folk' (*die heymelicheit der scrifturen den ghemeynen volke ontbinden*) – that is, making theology and biblical knowledge available in the vernacular. Was the translator of the Bible referring here to the same haughty people who, according to his confrère Brother Gerard, found Middle Dutch beneath them? If so, then Ruusbroec must also have been confronted during his visit to Herne with these opponents of vernacular theology, in which case it is they who are the proud persons described by Ruusbroec at the beginning of his *Booklet*: 'I will, with God's help, teach and enlighten the humble who love virtue and truth. And with the same words I shall inwardly trouble and cloud those who are false and proud, for my words will fall contrary to them and displease them, and the proud cannot tolerate that. It only makes them angry.'⁸⁹

Despite this forceful introduction, there is nothing to make us think that Ruusbroec's *Booklet* changed the minds of suspicious readers. The author began his discussion of the highest truth fully confident of a good outcome, but we must admit that it was only with great difficulty that he managed to bring his undertaking to a satisfactory conclusion. Ruusbroec had been embarrassed by the circulation of the *Realm*. Over the years he had presumably changed his mind about the bold assertions of his youthful writings, but now he was being put on the spot. To make up for the damage, he began in the *Booklet* to rid the objectionable passages from his first work of their compromising character: 'I have thus said that the contemplative lover of God is united with God by intermediary (*overmidts middel*), and again without intermediary (*sonder middel*), and thirdly without distinction or difference (*sonder differentie ochte onderscheet*). . . . I have further stated that no creature can become or be so holy that it loses its createdness and becomes God.' By assuring

⁸⁹ *Booklet* 29–33: 'Ic wille die oetmoedeghe, die doghede ende waerheit minnen, met der hulpen gods leren ende verklaren. Ende met den selven waerden salic die valsche hoverdeghe van binnen ontsaten ende verdonkeren, want mine waerde selen hen contrarie vallen ende onghelijc. Ende dat en mach die hoverdeghe niet gheliden, hi en werts altoes gheerghert.' See Ebbinghe Wubben 1903, pp. 132–34, for the prologue by the Bible translator quoted here, as well as De Bruin 1979, pp. 209–18. On Brother Gerard's knowledge of languages, see Seynnavé 1995, p. 17.

his audience that for him, too, there is an absolute difference between Creator and creature, Ruusbroec defuses the conflict. The rest of the *Booklet* boils down to a discussion of the threefold union with God and the attitude necessary to this state of grace. However, it is only in the last quarter of this rather brief text that Ruusbroec gets down to brass tacks and explains the ‘highest union without distinction, that is, without difference’ (*hoechster enicheit sonder differencie; dat is sonder onderscheit*).⁹⁰

This heading, which appears in several of the manuscripts containing the *Booklet*, marks the section in which Ruusbroec really tackles the subject of his dispute with the Carthusians. He keeps his argument brief. The highest unity is a state in which the soul has transcended so much towards the Godhead that one can actually no longer speak of a difference. Ruusbroec says literally: ‘There the beatitude is so simple that no difference can enter into it any more (*Ende daer es die salecheit alsoe eenwoldech dat daer nemmermeer onderscheit inne comen en mach*).’⁹¹ Ruusbroec seems to be saying that the term ‘without distinction’ (*sonder differencie*) is unavoidable because any semantic designation that even remotely suggests differentiation is inappropriate. That might seem like a subtlety of medieval scholasticism, but it was not intended as such. For Ruusbroec the union without distinction was part of a divine, individual experience of God; he was not seeking to define a categorical concept for theological thought. There was the rub, for the Carthusians’ objections were based on their perception of ‘without distinction’ as a formal term.⁹²

Here the chasm between theology and mysticism was unbridgeable. Ruusbroec was fighting a losing battle, but he refused to give up. Even though this concise treatise might give a different impression, Ruusbroec continued to wrestle with the problem thrust upon him by the Carthusians. In the *Beguines*, Ruusbroec’s last work, he returns to the question. We find parallel sentences in rapid succession about a ‘simple groundless blessedness without distinction which to God alone is essential but to us superessential’.⁹³ This is strikingly similar to the

⁹⁰ Threefold union in *Booklet* 34–39; beginning of the discussion on the highest unity, 438. For the quotation, see the headings in the variant apparatus.

⁹¹ *Booklet* 467–68.

⁹² For the argumentation in the *Booklet*, see 438–74. The discussion on the relationship between theology and the religious experience has still not been settled. Cf., among others, Van Nieuwenhove 2000, p. 87, in contrast to Mommaers 2000, pp. 159–64.

⁹³ *Beguines* 1/665–67: ‘envuldighe grondelose zalicheit sonder dyfferencie die gode alleene weselijc is ende ons overweselijc’. Analogous passages in the *Beguines* 1/653–68 and *Booklet* 331, 388 and 454.

Booklet, as though Ruusbroec wanted to try out fresh formulations, or was adapting notes previously made for use in the *Booklet*. The ‘unity without distinction’ (*eenheit sonder differencie*) haunted him for a long time, but trying to shed more light on the concept was a hopeless task. In the end Brother Gerard had to be satisfied with Ruusbroec’s assurances that further explanation would add nothing to a truth that one must experience oneself: ‘I could say much more about this, but those who possess this do not need it.’⁹⁴ And others, who have not attained the ‘superessence’ (*overwesen*), will never be able to grasp it. That was Ruusbroec’s final offer, and he would have been the last to make an issue of the conflict: ‘Concerning all the things that I understand, and feel, and have written, I submit myself to the judgement of the saints and of the Holy Church.’⁹⁵

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It was probably these words in particular which later conveyed the idea that the *Booklet* was to be read as an *apologia*. Its reputation as such did nothing to further the text’s reception. Apart from the *Beguines*, the dissemination of which was consciously controlled by Groenendaal, the *Booklet* is Ruusbroec’s least copied work. This was not due to Brother Gerard, since the only two manuscripts in which the *Booklet* occurs independently – that is, not as an appendix to other of Ruusbroec’s works – are connected with Herne and the Carthusian monastery at Diest, where Brother Gerard spent his last years. Otherwise the *Booklet* met with little response – certainly in comparison with *On the Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec’s other philosophical treatise. As far as the relatively modest Dutch tradition is concerned, the two texts are on more or less equal ground, whereas the number of Latin translations differs greatly. While the Latin *Stone* has survived in more manuscripts than its Middle Dutch original, we only know from notes in the Groenendaal manuscripts that a Norbertine monk from the Abbey of Park near Louvain made a Latin translation of the *Booklet*, though the text itself has never been traced.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Booklet* 509–10: ‘Vele meer waerde mochtic hier toe segghen, maer die dit beseten hebben, si en behoevens niet.’

⁹⁵ *Booklet* 537–39: ‘Van allen dien dat ic versta, ochte ghevoele, ochte ghescreven hebbe, soe late ic mi onder die sententie der heiligen ende der heilegher kerken.’

⁹⁶ See Verdéyen 1995b, p. 7, on Brother Gerard and the dissemination of the *Booklet*. See Warnar 2000b on the limited dissemination of the *Beguines*. On the *Booklet* as an *apologia*, see the heading of the text in the latest of the four manuscripts: ‘liber apologeticus

The limited dissemination of the *Booklet* is due primarily to the fact that the *Stone* was written first. The *Stone* had turned out much better from a philosophical point of view, so that those who had access to both texts chose the earlier work. Even Brother Gerard preferred the *Stone* to the *Booklet*. He observed with admiration that this concise text could on its own bring one to perfection, whereas his praise for the *Booklet* was much more sparing. Brother Gerard summarises the problem Ruusbroec treats in the text and offers his solution, which is based much more on his own reasoning than on consultation of the *Booklet*. He ignores almost completely the matters raised by Ruusbroec, apart from the sole passage in which the mystic presses home his point by appealing to a biblical source (John 17:21):

...this he [Ruusbroec] explains with Christ's words, where he bade his father that all his beloveds be subsumed into one, as he is one with the father. For although Christ prayed thus, he did not mean one as he has become one with the Father: a single substance of the Godhead – for that is impossible – but one without distinction such as he is one enjoyment and one blessedness with the Father.⁹⁷

This is how theologically educated monastics were accustomed to reason: with arguments derived from Holy Scripture and with clearly defined concepts and meanings. Brother Gerard searched the *Booklet* in vain for such methods and techniques, but his failure to detect them did not shake his belief in the writer's 'abundant grace' (*overvloedighe gracie*). Fortunately, the Carthusian did not live to see Ruusbroec's highest truth come under fire from his own confrères. Just before the end of the fourteenth century, Jean Gerson sent a letter to Bartholomaeus Clantier, a Carthusian from Herne, at whose request the chancellor voiced his opinion of the *The Spiritual Espousals*. Gerson could appreciate the first and second books, but he resolutely rejected the third as theologically unacceptable. In his view, Ruusbroec, in arguing the possibility of

sive retractationis' and cf. Surius's descriptive title: ... 'et est velut Apologia et explanatio sublimium quorundam huius sanctissimi patris dictorum'. In 1624 the publisher of the Dutch edition of the *Espousals* took the words quoted from the *Booklet* to be 'confessions of the author' (*Belydinghe des auteurs*). See Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 283–84, regarding the Latin translation.

⁹⁷ Brother Gerard quotation in De Vreese 1895, p. 18. Jan van Schoonhoven also prefers the *Stone* in his defence of Ruusbroec against Gerson. He quotes passages from the Latin version of the *Stone* in which Ruusbroec clearly shows how Creator and creature remain separate (see Combes 1945–72, pp. 708–10).

man's unity with God's essence, had disregarded the absolute distinction between Creator and creature – and that reeked of heresy.

Compared with the way in which Gerson stigmatised the *Espousals*, the discussion surrounding the *Realm* was child's play. Five centuries after the fact, Stephanus Axters was still impressed by the affair, as evidenced by his *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* (*History of Spirituality in the Netherlands*). 'Seldom, in our opinion, was the conflict between mysticism and theology in the Middle Ages prompted by an important mystical text to take on the sharp contours it did at this time. The authority wielded in prominent circles by both Jan van Ruusbroec and Chancellor Gerson could therefore only heighten the significance of the dispute.'⁹⁸

Axters was not the first – and certainly not the last – to recognise the historical importance of the conflict. Almost immediately, dossiers were compiled on the affair, first and foremost by Pierre d'Ailly, a friend of Gerson and his predecessor as chancellor – a fact which perhaps explains his interest in the question. In any case, d'Ailly was forced to keep abreast of the situation by virtue of his position. When the matter of the *Espousals* was brought before Gerson, d'Ailly was the bishop of Cambrai, and both Brussels and Groenendaal fell under his episcopal jurisdiction. More transcripts followed, until the correspondence between Gerson and Schoonhoven reached the distant corners of France. The involvement of an authoritative Parisian chancellor no doubt accounted for much of the international interest, but in the most detailed dossiers it is Ruusbroec who figures as the protagonist. Herne itself provided a manuscript with copies of Gerson's opinion, Jan van Schoonhoven's defence, a paraphrase in Latin of a passage from the *Booklet*, and Jordaens's translations of the *Stone* and the *Espousals*. Another collection of the above-mentioned documents contains, in addition, copies of two letters which Geert Grote sent to the brothers of Groenendaal, in which Grote voices objections to the circulation of the *Rungs* and the *Beguines* and also warns them of the criticism of the *Espousals* coming from both an unnamed master of theology and Heinrich of Langenstein, until 1382 vice-chancellor of the University of Paris.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ See I/1 and Axters 1950–60, vol. II, pp. 351–58, also for the quotation.

⁹⁹ See Leclercq, Vandenbroucke & Bouyer 1959, p. 526 and Guarnieri 1952 (Pierre d'Ailly); see also exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 134 (Herne) and no. 89 (manuscript containing letters written by Geert Grote).

Apparently the skirmishes surrounding the *Espousals* had begun before Gerson entered the fray. Bartholomaeus Clantier and the brothers of Herne did not instigate the debate about Ruusbroec's reputation, even though the critical Carthusians had set the ball rolling. The complications had, in fact, started with Ruusbroec's visit to Herne. The *Booklet* and Brother Gerard's prologue had let the genie out of the bottle: 'without distinction' would long remain a charged concept. An anonymous disciple of Ruusbroec discussed the problem in a short Dutch text presenting 'some ideas that seem rather obscure to some people at first glance',¹⁰⁰ which is a somewhat cryptic description of the problem that Ruusbroec had sought to solve in the *Booklet of Clarification*. The new contribution to the discussion attempts to make the controversial issue of 'unity without distinction' acceptable within the broader context of both the *Espousals* and Brother Gerard's prologue. The anonymous author was probably familiar with Gerson's ideas, which would be a convincing argument for dating the text to after 1400.¹⁰¹

Considering the sources of his argumentation, the author frequented Carthusian circles and could even have belonged to the community of Herne – the monastery where Ruusbroec's mysticism was simultaneously fostered and criticised in such curious fashion. For despite their reservations and the consequences thereof, Brother Gerard and his confrères played an important part in the textual tradition of Ruusbroec's works. In the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the Carthusians of Herne were particularly active as copyists of Middle Dutch spiritual prose. As such they maintained close ties to both Groenendaal and the world of

¹⁰⁰ Faesen 2000a, p. 199: 'eneghe sinne die naden iersten ane siene eneghen menschen doncker ghenoech scinen wesende'.

¹⁰¹ See Faesen 2000a on the text (with edition), where possible references to the *Booklet* are not taken into consideration. The anonymous author refers directly to the *Booklet*: 'for here [i.e. in the *Booklet*] much has been said about the unity with God of the good people and especially in the third part where he says that contemplative people are the same without difference or without intermediary to what they contemplate' (*want hier vele ghesproken es van dat de goede menschen een sijn met gode, ende sonderlinghe inde derde partie daer hi seit dat de godschouwende menschen dat selve sijn sonder differentie of sonder tusschenscheet dat si bescouwen*) (p. 199). The 'third part' is not the third book of the *Espousals* (as Faesen thinks), but the third form of unity with God that Ruusbroec distinguishes in the *Booklet*: 'ic hebbe aldus gheseghet dat de scouwende minnere gods met gode verenecht es overmidts middel ende oec sonder middel ende ten derden male sonder differentie ochte onderscheet' (*Booklet* 34–36). Influence of the *Espousals* is to be seen in the distinct 'threefold unities' (*drierhande enicheden*) (Faesen 200a, p. 199).

commercial book production in Brussels, and thus played a key role in the early dissemination of Ruusbroec's works.¹⁰²

Groenendaal, for that matter, had from its early days maintained warm relations with the order, as evidenced by an official report, drawn up in 1371 in the name of the general chapter of Carthusians, dealing with community prayer between them and their brothers in the Zonien Forest. Groenendaal had been granted this favour through the intercession of Jan Brand, the prior of the Carthusians at Cologne, who had informed the chapter meeting about the 'feelings of pious devotion' which the Groenendaal brothers exhibited towards the order in general and several Cologne Carthusians in particular. There is no mention of the persons involved, but the first to spring to mind are the Cologne prior himself and the Groenendaal sub-prior Reinier vanden Dale, both natives of Breda.¹⁰³

These two monastic administrators might have initiated the spiritual alliance that later caused Ruusbroec, in English translation, to be taken for a Carthusian. In the British *Confirmacio ordinis Carthusiensis*, a list of the saintly and miraculous persons who belonged to the order, Ruusbroec is recorded as the prior of the Carthusian monastery at Groenendaal. That was a misunderstanding, but it was followed by a clear view of the discussions surrounding the author and his work. Ruusbroec was 'a man of miraculous holiness and contemplation', and although he could be mistaken for a simple layman, the style and subject matter of his books proved that he possessed great knowledge, whether infused (i.e. imparted through divine grace) or acquired (*licet infuse, licet adquisite*). The *Confirmacio* does not pass judgement on the conflict with Gerson, nor does it discuss the role of theology in Ruusbroec's works. Nevertheless, the author felt safe in concluding from the mystic's writings that Ruusbroec had been directly inspired – literally 'infused' – by the Holy Spirit (*virum spiritu sancto infusum*).

These English annotations must have been based on a continental source, the original form of which could conceivably have been a Latin text incorporating Brother Gerard's prologue. He had, after all, once introduced Ruusbroec to his confrères as an inspired *auctor*. Such a text could easily have crossed the Channel, travelling from Brabant to England through contacts between brothers of the same order. More

¹⁰² This is discussed in detail in Kwakkel 2002.

¹⁰³ Dykmans 1940, pp. 381–82. Cf. Verdeyen 1995, pp. 7–8.

likely, however, is a link forged by the writings of another Carthusian. Around the mid-fifteenth century, Dionysius van Rijkel had begun to extol the mystic, assuring his readers that Ruusbroec had been instructed by the Holy Spirit (*virum istum a spiritu sancto instructum*). This wording bears so much resemblance to phrases from the *Confirmacio* that a direct connection is almost a certainty.

Still, all's well that ends well. Although reference was made to the affair with Gerson in the margin of the *Confirmacio* manuscript, by this time the mystic's reputation was firmly established among the Carthusians. With the knowledge we now possess, we may say that this happened despite, rather than owing to, Ruusbroec's attempts in the *Booklet* to clarify the highest truth.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ On the dissemination of Ruusbroec's works in England (and the role the Carthusians played in this), see Colledge 1952, esp. pp. 52–55; Ampe 1957b; De Soer 1959; Sargent 1976, pp. 227–29; Ampe 1975a, pp. 362–66 (see p. 361 for Dionysius van Rijkel).

CHAPTER VI

A CLEARLY ENLIGHTENED MAN

1. Ruusbroec's Latter Years

On 2 December 1381 Ruusbroec died at the age of eighty-eight, *compos mentis* (*wel machtich sijne verstentenis*) and surrounded by praying brothers to whom he had delivered a 'pleasant sermon' (*suete collatio*). After previous spells of illness so severe that he had been confined to his bed, his end did not come unexpectedly, certainly not for Ruusbroec himself. Earlier that year his long-dead mother had appeared to him in a vision, announcing his impending death during Advent. Ruusbroec received the message 'devotedly and with glad courage' (*devotelyc ende met bliden moede*), and without fear of the future. For quite some time the good prior of Groenendaal had been cared for in a separate room, but now he asked his brothers to bring him to the infirmary, where he spent his last days. Ruusbroec's condition worsened, but he died 'without any sign of suffering' (*sonder enich teyken van swaricheden*).

Thus wrote Pomerius, who is our only source for the events surrounding Ruusbroec's death. In this case there is a slight chance that Pomerius's detailed description of Ruusbroec's peaceful end actually deserves the credit we could not extend to his vague account of the mystic's early years. After all, the shaky historical foundation of *De origine* was certainly due in part to a simple lack of information. When Pomerius embarked on his biography of Ruusbroec, nearly a century had passed since the mystic's ordination as a priest. Ruusbroec's death lay in a much less distant past and was, moreover, an event that had taken place in Groenendaal, where Pomerius could still consult eye witnesses. In all likelihood, he was informed by a reliable source that the mystic had succumbed to a high fever and dysentery.

That diagnosis was probably correct, for – according to Pomerius – one of the people who stood by Ruusbroec's deathbed was the dean of Diest, a friend of the prior and also a renowned physician. Upon hearing of Ruusbroec's illness, he set off at once for Groenendaal, only to discover that his knowledge of medicine could no longer save the patient. The dean did not leave Ruusbroec's side, and after his friend's

death he kept vigil with the brothers of Groenendaal by the bier in the priory church. There Ruusbroec appeared in dazzling vestments to the dean, who saw this as proof of the special favours the mystic had extended to him when saying Mass.¹

If Pomerius wanted to report the historical facts about Ruusbroec's death, he did so with due regard for the conventions of hagiography, one of which calls for a clear record of the miracles performed by a prospective saint. A logical sequel to the mystic's apparition is an account of his relics. A beguine in Mechelen, who had preserved one of Ruusbroec's teeth, healed her toothache by holding this treasure to her cheek. Even more miraculous were the discoveries made when Ruusbroec's remains were exhumed in 1386 to be interred in a grave together with the recently deceased Vranke vanden Coudenberg. Except for slight deterioration of the nose, the prior's body appeared intact, as did the vestments in which he had been laid to rest five years earlier. Not only that, but the corpse gave off an odour of fragrant spices. By order of Jan 't Serclaes – the bishop of Cambrai, who had travelled to Groenendaal to conduct Coudenberg's funeral – Ruusbroec lay in state for three days, so that all those present could witness the miracle. The crowds came flocking in from Brussels and the surrounding area. Among the mourners were those who, out of pure devotion, 'went to where the dead body of the prior lay and kissed him on the mouth'.²

Reinterment was invariably part of a saint's life, but as a public event, Ruusbroec's *translatio* was the first step towards his canonisation. In his case it evidently happened with the express approval of the bishop of Cambrai – if in fact this scion of an illustrious Brussels family had not had a hand in these initiatives himself. Then again, it is strange that Ruusbroec's reburial, like the circumstances of his death, seem to be unverifiable by any other source. Neither Ruusbroec's death nor later miracles caused a ripple in contemporary historiography. Even the anonymous person who continued to write Jan van Boendale's *Brabantsche Yēesten* (*Episodes in Brabantian History*) – who says that he completed his chronicle in 1432 in the Zonien Forest, of all places – makes no mention of the mystic's *translatio*.³

¹ For Pomerius on Ruusbroec's death, see Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 161–62 (De Leu 1885, p. 305, where the cause of death is also reported).

² Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 162–64 (De Leu 1885, pp. 305–08): 'ghingen daer die dode lichaem des priors was ende custen hem aen sinen mont'.

³ On the *Brabantsche Yēesten*, see Stein 1994; regarding the author, see pp. 135–41.

The silence surrounding Ruusbroec, combined with the abundance of hagiographic motifs in Pomerius's biography, compels us to view the most salient details in *De origine* with a certain scepticism. In the sketch of Ruusbroec's last years, however, there are elements that correspond unquestionably to themes in his later works. The *Rungs* and the *Beguines* – and to a slight extent the *Mirror* – are coloured by a heightened spiritual sensibility that also permeates the chapters preceding Ruusbroec's death in *De origine*. Pomerius makes it seem as though the elderly mystic lived in a world of visions and revelations, which mostly came to him during divine worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. Onlookers thought that Ruusbroec's waning strength was taxed by performing the liturgy, but when Vranke vanden Coudenberg put the matter to him, the mystic assured the provost that his seeming frailty was in fact fainting brought on by spiritual ecstasy: 'For the infirmity that sometimes seems to come from my old age cannot be attributed to my nature, but to a visitation from God... for Jesus with His grace visited me during that Mass to the extent that he even spoke to me: "I am yours and you are mine"' (*Ik byn dijn ende du bist mijn*).⁴

In the *Rungs* Christ responds with the same words from the Song of Songs to verses that Ruusbroec puts in the mouth of a loving soul. They are, however, formulated in the first person, which suggests an autobiographical element, and their imagery of mutual devourment underlines yet again Ruusbroec's own fascination for Holy Communion:

More sweet than honeycomb you taste to me,
beyond all measure must your sweetness be.
Hungry I remain, though, famished still,
for of you I cannot have my fill.

*Ghi smaect mi suete boven honechraten,
Ende boven alle sueteheit van maten.
Altoes blijft in mi hongher ende begheeren,
Want ic en kan u niet verteeren.*⁵

⁴ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 160 (De Leu 1885, p. 303): 'Want tgebrec dat somtijt schijnt te comen van mijnder outhet en is mijnder natueren niet toe te scriven, mer bat der visitacien gods [...] want my Jhesus nu in die misse met sijnder graciën soe heeft ghevisitiert dat hy my selve aldus heeft toeghesproken: "Ik byn dijn ende du bist mijn".'

⁵ Ohly 1974 on the quotation from the Song of Songs. See *Rungs* 565–85 for the poem and the quotation from the Song of Songs. Cf. also the lines immediately preceding this passage: 'Thou art my food and my drink. The more I eat, the hungrier I am. The more I drink, the thirstier I am. The more I have, the more I want' (*Ghi sijt mine spise ende mijn dranc. Soe ic meer ete, soe mi meer honghert. Soe ic meer drinke, soe mi meer dorst. Soe ic meer hebbe, soe mi meer lust*).

The use of direct speech – which is rare in Ruusbroec's oeuvre – gives the impression that the author is voicing his own feelings. The dialogue with Christ is reminiscent of Ruusbroec's own experience of the celebration of the Eucharist. The same thought thrusts itself upon us when reading a more detailed dialogue in *On the Twelve Beguines*, which begins with a rhyming adaptation of the standard prayer uttered by the priest immediately before administering the sacrament:

I am unworthy that you come to me.
 My sins have wounded me most grievously,
 Restored to full health I shall never be,
 Unless your sweet mouth has the remedy,
 Speaking words that touch me inwardly,
 Coming from you, Lord, in majesty.

*ic en ben niet werdich dat ghi in my comt.
 Van sonden ben ic seere ghewont,
 ic en werde nemmermeer ghesont,
 my en troeste u soete mont
 ende spreke een woort dat my becomt
 dat uut uwer hoeheit comt.*⁶

Christ answers this prayer by declaring his willingness to give himself in the sacrament: 'I will do everything that thou desirest. I will be thy food, thy cook and thy host.' This graphic image is a new sampling of the previously mentioned food imagery that Ruusbroec almost inevitably employs in the sphere of the Eucharist. There follows a passionate reaction with phrases about all-devouring but insatiable desire:

I ache and crave with all my will,
 Of you I cannot get my fill.
 I eat, but with more hunger cursed
 I drink, now with redoubled thirst.
 ...
 Lord, I gladly drink the living blood
 streaming from your side, a precious flood
 pouring forth from your most holy body,
 receptacle of true nobility.
 My throat doth sense a sweetness beyond measure,
 I am half drunk, and cannot hide my pleasure.

⁶ *Beguines* 1/184–89.

*ic ghiere, ic gape ende ic begheere,
 ende ic en can u niet verteren.
 Soe ic meer eete, soe mi meer lust;
 soe ic meer drincke, soe my meer dorst.
 [...]
 Heere, ic drincke soe gherne u levende bloet
 Dat uut uwer siden woet
 Ende uut uwen heilighen live
 Dat edel is van groten prise.
 Het es soe soete in mire kelen;
 Ic bens half droncken, en mach niet helen.⁷*

The power of Holy Communion still provoked strong feelings in Ruusbroec, even after a lifetime as a priest. To be sure, the literary staging of a dialogue with Christ was common in spiritual literature, but there is a strong case to support the hypothesis of an autobiographical script. When the *Beguines* continues in prose, Ruusbroec transcribes a speech made by Jesus to his 'chosen beloved' (*uutvercorne lieve*), setting it against the liturgical backdrop which, according to Pomerius, forms the décor for Ruusbroec's visions. Christ's words begin as a general paraphrase of the Creed but gradually change into an overview of Ruusbroec's spiritual life:

I have fed and filled thy desire and thy sense-life with my tortured glorious body. I have fed and filled thy love and thy rational life with my spirit and with all my gifts and with all my merits, in which I was pleasing to my Father. I have fed and filled thy contemplation and the exaltation of thy spirit with my person, that thou mayest live in me and I in thee, God and man, in likeness of virtues and in unity of enjoyment.⁸

Ruusbroec's answer is a short and solemn prayer, which includes quotations from the Creed but ends with the same confirmation of the

⁷ The dialogue is to be found in the *Beguines* 1/179–247, quotations 195–96 ('Ic wil al doen dat ghi begheert. Ic wille sijn u spise, u cock ende u weerd'), 224–27 and 232–37.

⁸ *Beguines* 1/387–94: 'Ic hebbe u begherte ende u sinlijcke leven ghespijst ende vervult met mijnen ghemarteliden gloriosen lichame. Ic hebbe u minne ende u redelijcke leven ghespijst ende vervult met mijnen gheeste ende met allen mijnen gaven ende met alle verdienten daer ic mijnen vader inne behaghe. Ic hebbe dijn scouwen ende verhavenheit dijns gheests ghespijst ende vervult met mire persoonlijcheit, alsoe dattu leves in my ende ic in dy, god ende mensche, in ghelijcheit van duechden ende in eenheit van ghebrukene.'

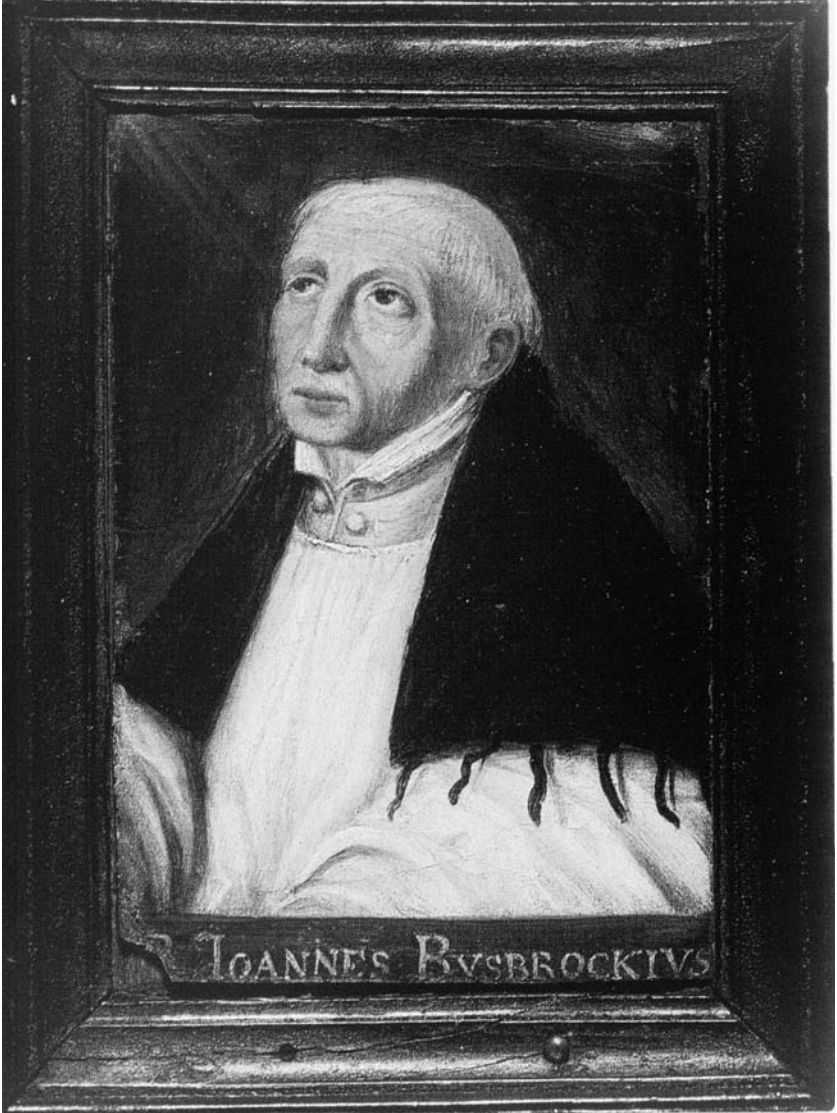


Fig. 13 Sixteenth-century portrait of Ruusbroec in his latter years.

highest religious life: 'Lord, Thou demandest of my spirit from within to see Thee as Thou seest me and to love Thee as Thou lovest me.'⁹

*

In the latter days of his authorship, Ruusbroec's texts reflected, more strongly than before, his own religious experience and life of prayer, yet the portrait of the mystic in old age would be woefully incomplete if we did not go beyond describing his visions.

In 1924 Father Leonce Reypens was just beginning a scholarly life in the service of Ruusbroec philology when he came into the possession of a small sixteenth-century painting with a depiction of the mystic. The portrait, no larger than a picture postcard, shows an Augustinian canon with a pious gaze directed upward towards a vague glow of heavenly light. The figure has so many distinctive features that Reypens was only too willing to believe he had discovered a true-to-life portrait of Ruusbroec. It had supposedly been copied from an older example by an artist who was able, 'just like the Flemish primitives, to read the soul from a face, and in its most salient features to render the highest spiritual elevation'. Having advanced this far, it was only a small step for Reypens to propose Jan Spieghel, the Groenendaal miniaturist who died so young, as the portrait painter.¹⁰

The facts would have had to be overinterpreted to prove this last hypothesis, and it appears from Reypens's analysis that he was motivated by his wish to find a tangible memento of Ruusbroec. The small painting is remarkable enough, simply because it portrays a Middle Dutch writer. Numerous miniatures depict medieval authors whose attributes or poses clearly show them engaged in the practice of their literary vocation, but no attempts were made to produce realistic portrayals of their physical appearance. Reypens's enthusiasm is therefore understandable, but dispassionate viewers nowadays are no longer likely to recognise the signs of Ruusbroec's glorious spiritual life. We

⁹ *Beguines* 1/371–408, quotation 407–08: 'Heere, gi eyscet mijnen gheeste van binnen, dat ic u sie alsoe ghi mi siet ende dat ic u minne alsoe ghi my mint.' On dialogue, soliloquy and similar texts, see Mertens 1986, pp. 301–09. It is not possible to pass judgement on the authenticity of the prayer attributed to Ruusbroec, which is included in Surius's edition and otherwise known only in a Dutch version backtranslated from this Latin version. See Le Clercq 1936 and Ampe 1975a, pp. 422–25.

¹⁰ See Verdeyen 1981a, p. 113 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 189; of the literature listed in the latter, see esp. Reypens 1968 (for the quotation) and Reypens 1969 on Jan Spieghel. On Reypens and Ruusbroec studies, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 609–19 and De Borchgrave 2001, pp. 128–40, 214–27.

are most struck by the figure's smooth facial features, which lend him a certain vitality despite the signs of age, such as his whitish grey hair and rather stooped posture.

Whether this argues in favour of the portrait's authenticity is not a matter for discussion here, but in *De origine* Pomerius gives the same impression of the elderly Ruusbroec. Although his physical powers were waning, the mystic's mind remained intact: 'for what always remained with him was his clear inspiration of God's grace' (*want hem nochtan altoes bi bleef sijn claer inspiracie der graciën gods*). When Ruusbroec wanted to write, he still sought the seclusion of the woods around Groenendaal, but now in the company of a confrère. This assistant, or secretary, wrote down what Ruusbroec dictated to him, but perhaps it was also his duty to keep an eye on the mystic. Ruusbroec had once become so lost in contemplation that he forgot everything around him and did not return to the priory for an alarmingly long time. The worried brothers had already combed large areas of the forest when they finally found their prior, sitting beneath a tree that seemed ablaze from the fire of Ruusbroec's devotion. This event left a deep impression. In the course of the sixteenth century, the place in the Zonien Forest where Ruusbroec had been found eventually grew into a place of pilgrimage, but the famous story of the lost mystic has a rather sobering detail in the Middle Dutch version. It says that one thing and another befell Ruusbroec 'in his old age' (*in sijn outheit*), after which the brothers preferred not to let the absent-minded prior wander around alone in the forest.¹¹

With the help of a secretary Ruusbroec continued to write until a ripe old age. He is possibly the only Middle Dutch author whose oeuvre took shape over half a century. Even the careers of such prolific writers as Jacob van Maerlant and the Bible translator of 1360 did not span more than three decades. Ruusbroec's stamina was not only a question of longevity. For most medieval authors, writing was not a full-time profession. Ruusbroec – as a beneficed cleric at a collegiate church and later as the head of a house of canons regular – was in the fortunate position of being able to devote himself as much as he pleased to literature. This gave him the opportunity to work steadily, with no outside pressure. Ruusbroec's average yearly production was far below that of the prolific Maerlant, for whom ten thousand verses a year was probably no exception. Ruusbroec, by contrast, would go

¹¹ Verdeyen 1981b, pp. 148–49 (cf. De Leu 1885, p. 293). On later veneration, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, p. 364.

for weeks without lifting a pen. Afterwards, to Pomerius's surprise, he was able to pick up the thread effortlessly, which implies that his texts had never really left his thoughts.¹²

Ruusbroec took the time to reflect. The delicate, independent composition of texts like the *Espousals* demanded infinitely more concentration and preparatory study than the adaptation into Middle Dutch of existing texts on which such men as Maerlant and the Bible translator of 1360 doggedly worked. It is no coincidence that Ruusbroec's production reached a peak with the *Tabernacle*. Presumably this ambitious biblical commentary required extra effort, but he could advance more quickly with the *Historia scolastica* to hand, since he was progressing down the beaten track of exegesis. After completing the *Tabernacle*, Ruusbroec slowed down to his normal pace, which we can measure rather precisely by examining the book compiled by Sister Martine van Woelputte. This single volume contains his entire oeuvre and was copied by one person. For the texts that Ruusbroec wrote after the *Tabernacle*, Sister van Woelputte used only four folios more than the 137 necessary for this sizeable work. The texts pre-dating the *Tabernacle*, together with the table of contents and Brother Gerard's prologue, fill the remaining 119 folios. If Ruusbroec did indeed take things easier in his old age, we must see this in relation to the first period in the Zonien Forest. The Brussels heyday and the Groenendaal autumn of Ruusbroec's authorship show no great difference in his output: in fact, he had never been a prolific writer.¹³

Ruusbroec also never intended to create an oeuvre. In contrast to Maerlant, whose collected works have been characterised as a 'world in words', Ruusbroec was the kind of author who was forever working on the same book – painting, as it were, the same portrait of his mystical world over and over again. Although he depicted this world in the *Realm* as the firmament itself and described it in the *Tabernacle* as an Old Testament edifice, these metamorphoses did not actually influence his ideas. The path of Ruusbroec's literary career often took a turning, but seldom involved a change of course.

The advancing years made innovation less and less likely. If asked, Ruusbroec explained his teachings to his confrères, visitors to

¹² On Ruusbroec's production, including his working tempo and writing habits, cf. Willaert 1993b, pp. 59–64. Material for comparison is to be found in Van Oostrom 1992, pp. 65–80.

¹³ Information on the manuscript copied by Martine van Woelputte can be found in Reynaert 1996c, pp. 26–31.

ni Prioris Monasterij Vallis-viridis, & reformatæ
 regationis Windesimensis Canonic. Regul. Auctor
 rocuratore Generali Canonicorum Regularium Congreg
 nis Lateranensis in omni humilitate & reuerentia exhibita



BEATVS HOMO, QVEM TV ERVDIERIS DOMINE.

A N T V E R P I Æ,
 OFFICINA PLANTINIAN
 M. DC. XXIII.

Fig. 14 Ruusbroec found by his confrères. Engraving of c. 1623.

Groenendaal and other interested parties. Gradually, however, he felt less need for the labour-intensive process of stylisation and organisation. This tendency became more obvious in *On Seven Rungs*, a rather concise text that possibly left Groenendaal for the first time only in the stylistically more elaborate Latin translation by Willem Jordaens. Geert Grote, in a letter written to Ruusbroec and his confrères in 1381, even advised them not to circulate the Middle Dutch *Rungs* until improvements had been made to the text.¹⁴

*

Ruusbroec's last work, *On the Twelve Beguines* – a curious compilation in which lucid expositions and miscellaneous sketches alternate at random – was much less well-rounded. Everything that had occupied Ruusbroec during his life as an author came up for discussion: from the highest union between God and the human spirit to the battle against false mysticism, from the uplifting nature symbolism in the *Realm* to the life of a priest in the *Tabernacle*. Not one of Ruusbroec's large themes is missing from the *Beguines*, but the text lacks the precise organisation and stylistic craftsmanship that had turned some of his previous works into jewels of mystical literature.

As an apparently unfinished text, the *Beguines* is a highly interesting case study for philologists, but its interpretation remains problematic. All the copies of the work are based on one and the same original text, which was edited at Groenendaal. Analysis of the various sections of text has revealed that an attempt was indeed made to introduce some structure into the work, but it is by no means certain that we can recognise the shaky hand of the old master in these efforts. Bearing in mind Ruusbroec's monumental compositions, it is difficult to accept

¹⁴ Jordaens padded out the occasionally bare framework of Ruusbroec's text and rephrased sentences which in the Middle Dutch version simply followed one another as individual statements, in anticipation of adapting it further and turning it into a cohesive whole. Cf., first of all, the beginning of the text, *Rungs* 1–2: 'Grace and the holy fear of Our Lord be with us all. All that is born of God overcometh the world, says St John' (*Gratie ende de heileghe vreesse ons heeren si met ons allen. Al dat ute gode gheboeren es verwindt de werelt, sprect sente Jan*). Jordaens translates this as follows: *Postulemus a domino suam cum sancto timore gratiam cum omnibus nobis secundum interiorum hominem firmiter stabiliri, qua secundum beati Johannis testimonium: Omne quod natum est ex deo vincit mundum*. This is quoted from the edition in Müller 1911 (pp. 2–3), where the translation is still attributed to Geert Grote. See De Baere 1993, pp. 158–59, regarding the attribution of the translation to Jordaens, and Kloosterman 1935 for an analysis of the translation. For the letter written by Geert Grote, see Mulder 1933, p. 109; cf. Kloosterman 1935, p. 264.

that the author – in full control of his senses until the very end – would have prepared the *Beguines* for publication in the form we now know it. Indeed, the diversity of the individual parts gives us reason to think that Ruusbroec himself never saw it as a whole.

It is easier to understand the incongruities in the *Beguines* if we take the work to be a collection of notes left behind by Ruusbroec, which an editor compiled into one text. In the present book, quotations from the *Beguines* have been used to illustrate some tendencies in Ruusbroec's writing that occurred much earlier in his life. These formed a prelude to the hypothesis presented here, namely that the *Beguines* consists of older texts which the author did not wish to be circulated individually. The reasons are not clear, but the story of Ruusbroec's embargo on the *Realm* has already shown that he was critical of his own writing. It is likely that others had taken it upon themselves to edit the *Beguines* even before Ruusbroec's death. In a letter dating from 1381, Geert Grote objects to some passages and advises the brothers of Groenendaal to stop circulating sections of the text. By this time Ruusbroec had apparently relinquished control of his writings.¹⁵

It was not an easy task to create order in the *Beguines*. Even in its present form, the reader is frequently confronted with what seem like fragments, scraps, remnants, preparatory studies or preliminary versions of earlier treatises. The passages from the *Beguines* found verbatim in the *Booklet* have already been mentioned. A comparison of the zodiacal signs and the seasons of the year recalls the allegory of the seasons in the *Espousals*. Attacks on the lamentable state of Church and society are perfectly in keeping with the *Tabernacle's* tirades, and the same is true of Ruusbroec's discussion of good and bad priesthood. One passage in the style of his letters seems originally to have been intended as correspondence, and has in fact survived independently in that epistolary form.¹⁶

The *Beguines*, however, is more than a compilation of mere fragments. About halfway through we find a detailed discussion of the spiritual life in an allegory of the planets and the firmament. Ruusbroec presents a new plan for a seemingly independent treatise:

¹⁵ See Kors 1999 and the introduction to the edition of the *Beguines* with regard to the structure of the text and the correspondence about the *Beguines*.

¹⁶ See *Beguines* 2b/211–799 (zodiacal signs and seasons), 2b/1111–1997 (attacks on the clergy) and 2b/1835–1937 (letters; see Scheepsma 1997, pp. 110–11; edition in Brinkerink 1907, pp. 388–96, with identification of the Ruusbroec excerpts).

In the beginning of the world and of Holy Scripture, the prophet Moses teaches us that God made heaven and earth, in order to serve us, so that we should serve Him here on earth outwardly in good works and in honourable conduct, and in heaven inwardly in spiritual virtues, in holy life, in spiritual exercises; and in the highest heaven, in contemplative life, united with God in enjoyment and in love. This is why all things were made. This is what nature, example and prefiguration, and Holy Scripture, and the eternal truth that is God himself testify to us.¹⁷

After this promising introduction, Ruusbroec descends from the heavenly spheres of the contemplative life to the symbolic firmament that is made transparent and clear by the 'indwelling of God and also by the sun of wisdom that lives therein'. Just as the heavens give off a dim, bright or fiery red light, there appear in the universe of the spiritual life first dim recollections (when one reflects on one's sins and the Last Judgement), then the bright intellect (when, freed of all images, one ascends to eternal wisdom) and finally fiery red love (meaning the yearning for God).¹⁸

This use of the firmament as a metaphor (*figure*) suggests that a new *Realm of Lovers* is in store, but the majesty of the *Beguine's* opening is not sustained. Ruusbroec's mystical cosmos could have become the new jewel in the crown of Groenendaal literature if he had successfully maintained the allegory of the planets and their influence on human characteristics. The project, alas, did not fulfil its promise. Ruusbroec could no longer muster the forces needed for a systematic approach. His astronomy became entangled in a muddle of digressions and incomplete deliberations which previous editors of the *Beguines* have glossed over as 'exalted applications' of the 'symbolic mentality of people living in the Middle Ages'. But Father Albert Ampe – just as much a Ruusbroec apologist as his dissertation supervisor Reypens – only excused

¹⁷ *Beguines* 2b/1–9: 'Inden beghinne der werelt ende der heiligher scriftueren, soe leert ons die prophete Moyses dat god maecte hemel ende eerde ons te dienen, op dat wij hem dienen soudien hier opder eerden in goeden werken ende in eersamen seden van buten; ende in die hemele in gheestelijcken duechden, in heilighen levene, in oefeninghen van binnen; ende inden oversten hemel in scouwenden levene, gode gheenicht in ghebrukene ende in minnen. Ende hier omme sijn alle dinghe ghemaect. Ende dit tuyghet ons natuere, exempelen ende figuren ende heilighen scriftueren ende die ewighe waerheit die god selve es.' Cf. also the passage immediately preceding this (*Beguines* 2a/687–90).

¹⁸ *Beguines* 2b/1–208. The quotation is *Beguines* 2b/138–39: 'inwoninghen gods ende oec vander sonnen der wijsheit die daer inne leeft'.

the author's style as 'playfulness and laxity, which often made us think of the Good Cook [Van Leeuwen]'.¹⁹

The *Beguines* displays at least one striking similarity to Van Leeuwen's work, namely its unfinished state. Just as Ruusbroec's disciple, in *Vanden seven tekenen der sonnen* (*On the Seven Signs of the Zodiac*), gave up halfway through his treatise, the master left out the moon in his doctrine of the planets. However, the imperfect structure of the *Beguines* is mainly due to a meteorite shower of text fragments. A good example of the overly eclectic nature of the work is a chapter which, viewed on its own, could be described as a sermon on the biblical passage 'Keep the commandments, and be obedient and humble to all creatures, for the Lord's sake' (cf. 1 Peter 2:13). This is followed by a short discussion of whether one should serve God or live a life of sin, after which Ruusbroec bursts into verse:

If Christ's disciple you would be, Him you must imitate.
 Be innocent and brave, the sinful life repudiate.
 First you must renounce yourself, your inner self gainsay,
 So that the spirit of the Lord will thrive in you away.

Wildi Christus discipel sijn, soe moetti hem ghelijcken
Onnosel ende coene, in sunden niemen wiken.
Ghi moet uus selfs verloechenen ende vertyen
*Sal Cristus' gheest in u ghedyen.*²⁰

The lines of poetry that now flow forth come to an end only after a hundred or so lines, with no appreciable let-up in the rhyming couplets. The verses are chock-full of advice on the proper attitude towards property, poverty, one's fellow man, self-satisfaction and other edifying themes. The whole seems like a sermon or pastoral lesson aimed at novices or others still learning to become Christ's disciples. At any rate, it is barely linked thematically to the preceding or following sections, and there is certainly no formal connection, since the surrounding parts of the text are not in verse but in prose.²¹

The *Beguines* looks like a portfolio containing Ruusbroec's unfinished sketches, arguments-in-the-making and fragmentary talks, lessons, letters and guidelines. A common theme running through this collage – though

¹⁹ Introduction to Ruusbroec, *Werken*, vol. IV, p. XXX, supplied with critical commentary in Wackers 1989; Ampe 1945, p. 68ff. (on Ampe, see Hendrickx 1990).

²⁰ *Beguines* 2b/1002–04. Earlier quotation b989–90: 'Hout die ghebode ende syt ghehoorsam ende onderworpen allen creatueren, om die eere gods'.

²¹ *Beguines* 2b/989–1066.

not continuously – is the pedagogic element, as it appears in the paraphrased sermon. At any rate, the instructive nature of the *Beguines* was soon recognised. In a copy made directly from the Groenendaal manuscript, the second half of the text is titled ‘An instruction’ (*Een onderwijs*). Another copy bears a more general indication of the wide-ranging subject matter of the *Beguines*: ‘Here follows the book of the twelve beguines, which discusses the twofold life of humankind, namely the contemplative and the active’ (*contemplativa videlicet et activa*). This is an extremely superficial description of the contents, yet it does bear a striking resemblance to Pomerius’s description of the collaboration between the elderly Ruusbroec and the assistant who accompanied him on his wanderings through the Zonien Forest: ‘And continuing like this, he [Ruusbroec] wrote of lofty material, treating of both the active and the contemplative life.’ Was this the subject matter that was later collected into the *Beguines*? And was Ruusbroec’s secretary the one who worked up the notes into a whole and added it to the Groenendaal manuscript of the mystic’s works?²²

The experts now assume that Ruusbroec’s works were collected in Groenendaal into a single volume before the *Beguines* was finished: ‘And this is why it [the *Beguines*] was placed at the end of the Groenendaal book containing all his [Ruusbroec’s] works’ (*Ende daer om eest achter gheset inden boeke te Groenendale daer alle sine boeke staen*). These are the words of someone who studied the complete Groenendaal manuscript shortly after Ruusbroec’s death. They are usually interpreted as a reference to the physical location of the work: the quires containing the *Beguines* were supposedly bound into the back of an existing book. The authoritative Middle Dutch dictionary, however, gives only the following definitions of *achtersetten*: ‘to keep in the background’, ‘to keep silent about’ and ‘to leave aside’, all of which seem preferable here. After all, apart from the manuscripts containing Ruusbroec’s entire oeuvre, the *Beguines* was not actively circulated from Groenendaal.²³

²² For the heading, see *Beguines* (variants of the title). Quotation from *De origine* (‘Ende aldus vervolgende soe bescreef hi alsoe hooge materie, beyde vanden werkenden ende schouwenden levene’) taken from Verdeyen 1981b, p. 149. Here, too, the Middle Dutch text is more detailed than the Latin: ‘both of the active and the contemplative life’ (*beyde vanden werkenden ende schouweden levene*) is rendered there as *utriusque vitae* (De Leu 1885, pp. 293–94).

²³ Quotation in De Vreese 1895, p. 112. For the interpretation, see Warnar 2000b, p. 34, differing from Kienhorst & Kors 1998a, pp. 24–25. The interpretation given there of *achtersetten* as ‘placing at the back [of the book]’ is actually contradicted in the same

Nevertheless, Ruusbroec's confrères did well to preserve the collected material, for the *Beguines* gives us a much clearer picture of the mystic in his latter days than the so-called author portrait. The more we read of the text, the more we see how Ruusbroec increasingly assumed the role of Christ's messenger. After his opening dialogue with the beguines, in the second half of the book Ruusbroec seems to withdraw as a teacher, especially when he explains to his audience how one becomes a disciple of Christ. In the *Rungs* Ruusbroec had already portrayed Him as 'our cantor and our headmaster', but in the *Beguines* the mystic further elaborated upon this image by turning his adaptation of the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels into a 'rule' (*regule*) exemplified by Christ's life on earth.²⁴

At the end of the text Ruusbroec carries his disappearing act to extremes when he presents the testament of Christ. Referring to the apostles who received the Holy Spirit at the Feast of Pentecost, he says that Christ lived in them and they in Him. Such is the existence of all saintly people, and in sketching their attitude to life, Ruusbroec suddenly arrives at his own literary testament:

They live in the Spirit without anxiety, fear, encumbrance or sorrow. They know in their spirit from God's spirit that they are chosen sons of God. No one can take that testimony from them, for they feel eternal life in their spirit.

I have often written these words, but I renounce myself and subject myself to the eternal truth, and to the faith of Holy Christendom, and to the teachers who, by the Holy Spirit, have explained the Holy Scripture. But what I feel must remain with me. I cannot drive it out of my spirit. Even if I were to gain the whole world, I could not hesitate or distrust Jesus, that He might condemn me. If I hear anything to the contrary, I shall keep silent. About virtue and vice I shall write little more.²⁵

article by the subsequently developed theory that it was the addition of the *Beguines* to an existing manuscript that caused the book to be unbound and split into two volumes.

²⁴ See *Rungs* 820. Cf. Kors 1999, pp. 338–39, for the motif of the *regule*.

²⁵ *Beguines* 2c/1302–14: 'Si leven inden gheeste sonder anxt, vrees, commer ende verdriet. Si hebben in haren gheeste vanden gheest gods dat si uutvercoren sonen gods sijn. Dat ghetughe en mach hen niemen nemen. Want si voelen in haren gheeste ewich leven. Dit woordt hebbic dicwile ghescreven, maer ic vertye mijns ende late my onder de ewighe waerheit ende onder dat ghelove der heiligher kerstenheit ende onder die leeraren die de heilighe scriftuere overmids den heilighen gheest hebben. Maer dat ic ghevoele dat moet my bliven. Ic en macht uut mijnen gheest niet verdriven, al soudt my alle die werelt vromen. Ic en mocht niet twifelen noch Jhesum mestrouwen dat hy mi soude verdoemen. Alsic contrarie hore, dan willic swighen. Van duechden ende van onduechden willic luttel meer scriven.' See Mertens 1989b with regard to spiritual testaments as a literary genre.

Everything comes together here: Ruusbroec's life in the spirit, the certainty of having enjoyed the highest honour as one of God's chosen sons, the understanding of scripture and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the highest authority, the tension between dogma and a feeling of blessedness that cannot be denied. These are not the final words of the *Beguines*, but that should not prevent us from adding these sentences to literary history as the testament of Jan van Ruusbroec.

2. *De numero et ordine suorum voluminum*

The death of the protagonist did not bring an end to Ruusbroec's story. After the good prior's demise, the story of his authorship continued to unfold. Fuelled by the controversy surrounding Gerson and the *Espousals*, the cultivation of Ruusbroec as a divinely inspired mystic gained momentum. In his Groenendaal chronicle Pomerius painted a picture of the mystic as an enlightened mind, and a similar image emerged at more or less the same time in the manuscripts of Ruusbroec's collected works. Miniatures, prologues and other reports reinforced the idea of a mystical phenomenon. The transformation of Ruusbroec's reputation will be treated at length in the next chapter, but we must first assess these monumental compilations on the basis of their importance in delineating the mystic's oeuvre. In that sense they continue to exert a strong influence on Ruusbroec research.

It was not customary to assemble the works of a medieval author into a single volume. Apart from Ruusbroec, this has happened in Dutch literature only to the mystics Jan van Leeuwen and the beguine Hadewijch – with the Dutch poet and performing artist Willem van Hildegarsberch as the profane odd man out. Ruusbroec is the only one whose works were repeatedly compiled into one book. The rarity of such volumes explains why we are just now beginning to grasp the true nature of the imposing Groenendaal codex of Ruusbroec's collected works. The full-page miniature adorning this book lends it the stately air of a standard manuscript, and several remarkably faithful copies heighten the impression that this first edition of Ruusbroec's works had an official status. Several fifteenth-century Dutch authors following in Ruusbroec's footsteps were so well versed in the master's oeuvre that they must have had direct access to a copy of his collected works, probably one belonging to a monastic library, since such costly books were seldom owned by individuals.



Fig. 15 In 1480 Sister Martine Woelputte made a very faithful copy of the complete Groenendaal manuscript of Ruusbroec's works, including this author miniature.

Separate anthologies were indeed made from the Groenendaal manuscript or its copies, but these codices were of limited importance for the dissemination of Ruusbroec's texts. Even of the works written in the Zonien Forest, the Groenendaal manuscript represents a side branch or a second stage in the textual tradition. The remarkably clean codex does not bear signs of frequent copying; rather, it seems to have been made for the purpose of providing a clear-cut body of writings by Ruusbroec, in an effort to exert some influence on his literary legacy.²⁶

This may surprise modern-day readers, used as we are to a printed book with a title page clearly displaying the author's name, and texts produced in large editions of identical copies. In a manuscript culture the situation was complicated by anonymous copies, spurious attributions, unverifiable adaptations and random excerpts. Authors had no guarantee that their work would be given the treatment they had intended. The fate of the *Realm* has shown that writings took on a life of their own – with all the ensuing problems – as soon as they left the author's hands. Scribes with their own aims and readers with changing tastes were interested in the content of a text, or parts of it, and did not necessarily give much thought to the author's intentions and efforts. 'Writing brings me little profit' (*Van dichten comt mi cleine bate*) – thus reads the famous lament at the beginning of the fourteenth-century poem *Beatrijs*, which is generally interpreted as the author's disappointment

²⁶ See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, nos. 42–45, regarding the Ruusbroec manuscripts and Deschamps 1972, no. 24 (Hadewijch), no. 55 (Van Leeuwen) and no. 40 (Hildegardisberch). A separate category comprises those manuscripts containing collections of sermons by the same person (for example, Liefinck 1936). The apparent rarity of authors' manuscripts in Middle Dutch literature emerges from the somewhat harsh treatment they receive in Kienhorst 1996 and Wackers 1996b. However, for a later discussion of Ruusbroec manuscripts, see Kienhorst & Kors 1998a, b and c and Alaerts 2000; Reypens 1923 is still very important. Regarding copies of the Groenendaal codex, see Kienhorst & Kors 1998a, pp. 33–45, 1998b and 1998c, which also discusses an anthology from the Groenendaal manuscript. A thorough knowledge of Ruusbroec's writings has been demonstrated by, among others, Hendrik Mande, Hendrik Herp and Frans Vervoort. On this subject, see Willeumier-Schalij 1981; for Frans Vervoort, see also Peters 1968, pp. 69–98. See also Willeumier-Schalij 1983 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 74, for quotations from Ruusbroec in Jan van Meerhout; see Kors 1988 on the Middle Dutch treatise *Fili accedens*, attributed to a prior of Groenendaal, who had access to a manuscript from Ruusbroec's priory for the numerous Ruusbroec quotations. Regarding the somewhat secondary position of the Groenendaal manuscript in connection with the *Tabernacle*, see the introduction to the edition. On the status of the Groenendaal manuscript, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 264–75.

at the meagre monetary rewards – let alone personal recognition – to be gained by writing.²⁷

Ruusbroec's texts, too, were initially treated without regard for the author. This emerges from the manuscript containing *Beatrijs*, which was produced in Brussels around 1374, by which time Ruusbroec's fame had already spread abroad. At the end of the *Beatrijs* manuscript are some catechetical pieces, which were discovered only in about 1900 to contain excerpts from *The Realm of Lovers*, *On the Christian Faith* and *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, though without mention of Ruusbroec. Contemporary manuscripts from the Brussels area contain similar anonymous compilations from the *Realm* and the *Tabernacle*. The late fourteenth-century list of Dutch books in the library at Rooklooster contains the titles of Ruusbroec's works, but not his name.²⁸

Oblivion was, however, not so much the inevitable fate of medieval authors as the result of a conscious choice. Anonymity had traditionally been regarded as a pious virtue, since this was a token of the author's modesty and a sign that he accepted his subservience to his work. Such noble selflessness was on the wane in the fourteenth century. Ruusbroec's contemporaries who wrote in Dutch, such as Boendale and Maerlant, felt compelled to announce themselves as the author of their works. Ruusbroec never mentioned his name in his texts, the signed letters being the only exception. The fact that Ruusbroec is nevertheless mentioned by name more often than any other author in the Middle Dutch tradition is due to the manuscripts of his collected works, for these books represented a turning-point in the sense that the interest taken in Ruusbroec's texts began definitely to shift from the contents to the author.

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That was quite a change in a literary culture in which personal authority was ascribed only to Church Fathers and first-rate theologians, whose prestige surpassed the fame of their writings. In the modest realm of Middle Dutch letters, Ruusbroec was one of the brightest luminaries.

²⁷ On *Beatrijs*, see Meder 1993, p. 68. On medieval authorship in general, see Wenzel 1998, Kimmelman 1999, pp. 1–35, and Meier 2000, esp. pp. 338–41.

²⁸ With regard to Ruusbroec in the *Beatrijs* manuscript, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 34; regarding the mystic in another Brussels manuscript, see Lievens 1957b. For the book list, see De Vreese 1962, p. 62.

He even put in an appearance in anthologies featuring excerpts from his work alongside, and on an equal footing with, translated excerpts ascribed to Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. One side effect of this high regard was the attribution to Ruusbroec of more and more texts. The prior of Groenendaal shared this normally posthumous honour with the international elite of spiritual writers. Medieval scribes tended to place anonymous texts under the guardianship of famous authors. They did so in good faith and from a highly developed sense of textual authority, which is perhaps why the problem of dubious attributions in the field of Middle Dutch literature is most complicated when dealing with the oeuvre of Ruusbroec.²⁹

Earlier in this book, arguments were put forward to support Ruusbroec's authorship of two songs and a text on the Eucharist, but most of the other attributions cannot pass the test of philological scrutiny. For example, the idea that the mystic is actually the author of a *Glose opden pater noster* (*Gloss on the Paternoster*), which has survived in various versions, seems definitely to have been disproved, and it is just as unlikely that Ruusbroec had a hand in a treatise on a sevenfold rule of mystic love and a discussion of true humility as the surest way to God. Still, one cannot always hold it against medieval scribes for thinking they recognised enough of Ruusbroec's mastery in anonymous texts to identify him as the author. One such attribution, though incorrect, was certainly understandable: nearly three-quarters of Hendrik Mande's early fifteenth-century *Spiegel der waerheit* (*Mirror of Truth*) consists of passages from the *Tabernacle*, and it was therefore announced in a sixteenth-century copy as 'a devout little book by the priest Jan van Ruusbroec'. Thus one can see why the prior of Groenendaal was regularly taken to be the author of *On the Twelve Virtues*, a work written in the spirit of Ruusbroec and his *Espousals*.³⁰

The putative authorship of this last text has created the most commotion. According to no fewer than seven Middle Dutch manuscripts, *On the Twelve Virtues* was a work by Ruusbroec, and even the Latin

²⁹ See De Vreese 1900–02, pp. 502–08, for the anthology containing Ruusbroec. See Ampe 1964 regarding attributions to Ruusbroec.

³⁰ On the *Glose vanden pater noster*, see Warnar 1995a, p. 61 and p. 186, n. 88, including the literature listed there (esp. Lievens 1960c, pp. 211–23). On *Der mynnen regele*, see Vekeman 1987. With regard to the text on humility, see Lievens 1960c, pp. 223–28. On the *Spiegel der waerheit*, see Mertens 1984, pp. 7–8: 'een devoet boecksken here Johans Ruesbroeck'.

translation – by none other than Geert Grote – names the mystic as the author. An important argument against the attribution has been that the work does not occur in the body of texts in the large Groenendaal manuscript. In the case of the *Virtues*, this seems sufficient reason to reject Ruusbroec's authorship, but it remains to be seen whether other attributions can also be dismissed by a reference to this codex. For this to be possible, one must first clear up the complicated genesis of this manuscript. It was produced in various phases, which can be reconstructed only in part, for at some point the book was unbound to split the quires containing the individual texts into two equal parts and to rebind them as two volumes – one of which, to make matters worse, is now lost.³¹

It cannot be said with certainty whether the remaining half – containing the *Tabernacle*, the *Mirror* and the *Rungs* – offers sufficient clues as to where the manuscript was made, since the Groenendaal library mark, which was added only later, actually says nothing about the place of production. The earliest collection of Ruusbroec's texts was begun by Brother Gerard, who in any case acquired his copy of the *Realm* from a *notarius* active in the Brussels circles of professional text producers. The likelihood that the large Ruusbroec manuscript was also made in Brussels notarial circles can be inferred from the eye-catching drawings of stone walls which the collaborating scribes drew around corrections in the margins. Similar pieces of masonry were used in those days by notaries as a figurative way of initialling documents.³²

This is not enough evidence to confirm the Brussels origin of the Ruusbroec manuscript. In Ruusbroec's day, notaries and scribes were usually recruited from the same groups of secular clergy who provided the first Groenendaal canons. This would explain the metaphorical terms Ruusbroec uses in the *Beguines* to describe the way Christ 'accomplished, ordained, confirmed and sealed His testament by His death' in the presence of 'exceedingly many notaries from all lands, of all tongues'.³³

³¹ The most important publications on the genesis of the Groenendaal manuscript are Reypens 1923 and Kienhorst & Kors 1998a and 2001, even though the last two publications draw conclusions that cannot be based on the material presented.

³² Cf. Mannaerts 1997 with illustrations of notaries' marks. This subject is treated in more detail in Kwakkel 2002.

³³ *Beguines* 2c/459–61: 'doe Jhesus Cristus sijn testament volmaecte, oordineerde, confirmeerde ende seghelde met sijnre doot, daer waren over veel notarise uut allen landen, van allen tonghen'.

Regardless of the conclusions to be drawn from these observations, it is clear that the hypotheses concerning the history of the Groenendaal manuscript are far from conclusive. We must be equally sceptical about the tacit endorsement of the idea that the original Groenendaal codex represented Jan van Ruusbroec's complete works. Certainly given its shadowy history – and with only half of the book at our disposal – it is impossible to determine whether the compilers even claimed to present all of the mystic's works. In the year 1381 collections of manuscripts could not be accessed systematically through library catalogues, and no doubt it was extremely difficult to gain a complete overview of everything Ruusbroec had committed to parchment or wax tablets during his long life. The authenticity of the collected works is beyond dispute, but there must originally have been more.

In any case, in addition to the two volumes with Ruusbroec's eleven treatises (and a third volume with Jordaens's Latin translations of the *Espousals*, the *Stone*, the *Tabernacle* and the *Rungs*), Groenendaal's library must also have contained a book of letters written by the mystic. On the balance sheet of Ruusbroec's oeuvre, this *liber epistolarum* is the greatest loss. His correspondence ran to more than the seven letters that Surius managed to collect for his translated edition, but it is extremely difficult to determine whether more have been preserved in other manuscripts. Several epistles ascribed to Ruusbroec can be proved apocryphal, but the mystic is also connected with texts that strongly resemble, in both form and content, his canonical letters. A passage treating eight prerequisites for true perfection – presented as the words of Ruusbroec amidst excerpts from the *Espousals* – are of the same tenor as his warnings to Catharina van Leuven and Margriet van Meerbeke. Indeed, the fourth point in this passage warns of the dangers of a 'particular friendship with one person' at the expense of a union with the heavenly bridegroom, and the fifth point advises one not to worry any longer about family and friends.³⁴

³⁴ Ms. Leiden UB, Ltk 222, fol. 49v: 'Dat vierde punt is dattu di of houden selste van sonderlinger vrienſcap enichs persoens op dattu sonder vreemder minnen geenicht moechſte worden dinen brudegom...Dat vijfſte punt is dattu di niet alte ſeer en ſelſte verbliden of bedroeven of alte ſorchvoudich weſen om dijn magen mer bevelenſe gode.' Cf. also the ſhort diſcuſſion in which it is ſtated that 'the holineſſ of people lies not in ſavour nor in ſweetneſſ but in true virtues and humility' (*die heilicheit des menſchen niet en leyſt in ſmaeck noch in zueticheit mer in gewaerige doecheden ende oetmoedicheit*); concise enough to be ſent as a letter; its content is completely in keeping with the pains Ruusbroec took to find the right approach, which determines the tone of his letters (Lievens 1980, pp. 219–21).

It is entirely possible that we have caught a glimpse here of a text from the lost book of letters, but we are none the wiser as to the contents of the *liber epistolarum*, nor do we know how many other letters it might have contained. For that matter, it is alarming enough to learn that the mystic's confrères in Groenendaal kept a separate *liber epistolarum* in addition to the large codex, for its very existence suggests that the treatises in the large Ruusbroec manuscript were selected according to criteria which the letters did not fulfil. This would explain why we search this volume in vain for the two songs and the Eucharist commentary, whose attribution to the mystic is indeed plausible.

It does not look as though these Ruusbroec fragments are going to increase in number any time soon. Hoping for an unknown masterpiece to surface is unrealistic, but theoretically a volume of 'dispersed works', by way of a supplement to the now complete edition of Ruusbroec's *Opera Omnia*, would certainly represent more than a paltry postscript to the bulky volumes containing the *Espousals* (more than seven hundred pages) and the *Beguines* (two volumes). On closer inspection some attributions appear to be very defensible indeed. This holds true in particular for several individual texts, of which the surviving copies are sometimes attributed to Ruusbroec. These initially belonged together in a kind of compendium, the original of which must stem from the mystic's immediate circle. The oldest manuscript to contain this patchwork of small treatises – dating from around 1400 and originating in Brussels – was mentioned previously because it contains scraps of Ruusbroec's *Realm*. The spirit of the compendium has much in common with the master's work, and some passages even read like a summary of Ruusbroec's mystical thought:

If a man wishes to understand truth, he must climb upwards in practice and with love and intellect, rising above himself and his senses, so that he stands with his highest spiritual powers elevated and lifted upright towards God. And he must climb above what is possible by nature into grace and above reason and rational consideration into faith, and he must lift up his mind above the temporal into the eternal, and he must perceptibly behold all the good and the perfection of the divine nature, and above all he must acquiesce in God and under God and he must undergo the highest inworking and moving of God, to the utmost of his

Ampe 1975a, pp. 329–30, for the Latin translations and p. 243 for the book of letters. On this subject, see also the introduction to the *Letters* (pp. 489–91).

ability, and he must renounce himself in everything and cleave to God with heartfelt love.³⁵

Usually such close kinship to Ruusbroec's ideas is regarded as evidence of the master's influence, but the attributions and provenance of the Brussels compendium are reason enough to consider assigning to him the authorship of individual passages. A remarkable fact in this context is that the words just quoted, as well as many more passages from the compendium, recur almost verbatim in *Van drien staten* (*On the Three States*) by Hendrik Mande. Active in Holland in the circles of the Devotio Moderna, Mande, a faithful follower of Ruusbroec, incorporated long passages from the master's oeuvre in his own texts. The *States* bears no trace of a literal Ruusbroec quotation, yet in the past Mande's dependence on Ruusbroec has been inferred mainly from this text, especially because – as the title already reveals – the *States* is clearly based on the model of the active, yearning and contemplative life presented in the *Espousals*. However, Mande did not derive his mystical system from Ruusbroec; rather, he copied it from the Brussels compendium: a text which, to his knowledge, was apparently just as reliable as the master's recognised work.³⁶

Already inclined to accept that Ruusbroec's writings could have included more than those preserved in the manuscripts of his collected works, we are strengthened in this belief by a short note regarding what the mystic supposedly taught about the 'temptations that God placed

³⁵ The manuscript in question is Brussels, KB II 1039 (quotation fols. 72v–73r): 'Sal die mensehe waerheit verstaen, soe moet hi oplemmen met oefeningen ende met minnen ende verstennissen boven hem selven ende boven sinne, alsoe dat hi met sinen oversten crachten verheven sta ende opgherecht in gode. Ende hi moet oplemmen boven nature in gracies ende boven redene ende redenlec gemerc in den geloeve ende hi moet sijn gemuede verheffen boven tijt in ewicheit ende hi moet aensien gevoelike de goede ende die volcomenheit godliker naturen ende boven al soe moet hi hem laten in gode ende onder gode ende den inwerkene ende den bewegene gods op dat alder hoechste na allen sinen vermogene ende hi moet sijns selfs vertien in allen dingen ende cleven aen gode met herteliker minnen.' For individual passages from this compendium that have survived under Ruusbroec's name, see Ampe 1952, pp. 254–80 and Beckers 1974, p. 307 (cf. texts in manuscript Brussels, KB II 1039, fols. 94–100 and fols. 14–15, respectively). The last text was published in Hoogland 1886, pp. 109–10, from a manuscript in which this text is immediately followed by other texts from the Brussels compendium, as well as excerpts from the *Espousals*. Cf. also Ampe 1966a, p. 178, who detected a connection between a passage from the *Booklet* and this text, which has also survived elsewhere.

³⁶ See Visser 1899, p. 69 and p. 86ff., with reference to Van Otterloo 1896, where Mande's presumed indebtedness is put into perspective. Cf. the quotation with Moll 1854, pp. 282–83 (*Van drien staten*).

upon mankind' (*becoringhe die god opte mensche gestaedt*). On the path to the heavenly Jerusalem a pious person encounters three merchants: the devil, bodily nature and the world. The subtle difference between 'seeing, beholding and examining' (*sien, aensien* and *besien*) their merchandise is the same as coming into contact with sin, succumbing to it, and freely consenting to it. The first is intrinsic to life on earth, the second is human but should be avoided as much as possible, the third is to be condemned in the strongest terms. A quotation from Augustine emphasises that one must fight these inclinations with all one's might.

This short lesson was added in Dutch to a Latin translation of *On the Twelve Virtues* (attributed to Ruusbroec) in a manuscript belonging to the Carthusians of Herne. Does this short text constitute a personal reminiscence of the mystic's visit? Not only does the note's provenance point in that direction, but both the content and the composition of the edifying lesson correspond in detail to Brother Gerard's description of Ruusbroec's demeanour during his visit to the Carthusians. When they begged Ruusbroec to allow them to share in his great mystical wisdom, he preferred to edify them with several *exempla* and the words of the great teachers of the Church:

When he sat with our people in the convent and we spoke to him, asking to hear still more spiritual addresses from his lofty intellect, he did not want to speak his own mind, but he related several *exempla* and words of saintly teachers, wishing to edify us in the love of God and strengthen us in the service of the Holy Church.³⁷

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Fortunately, the available information enables us in this case to form a considered opinion of the passage's authenticity. It is more difficult – if not impossible – to make a well-reasoned pronouncement about the other lectures and sermons attributed to Ruusbroec. In medieval practice, the spoken word was often recorded by someone other than

³⁷ The text was published in Ruusbroec, *Werken*, vol. IV, pp. 291–92. Cf. *Mirror* 189–90: 'For even if the fiend shows you his goods and merchandise, if you do not buy it with love, it does not stay with you' (*Want al toent u de viand sine krame ende sine meerce, en coeptdijs niet met liefden, soe en blives u niet*). Brother Gerard quotation in De Vreese 1895, pp. 12–13: 'Als hi met ons luden sat int convente ende wi hem aenspraken om te horen yet gheesteliker reden van sinen hoghen verstande, soe en woude hi niet spreken als uut hem selven, mer hi vertrac [vertelde] enighe exempele ende woerden uten heylighen lereren, daer hi ons mede stichten woude inder minnen gods ende versterken inden dienste der heyligher kerken.' Regarding the attribution, see Warnar 1993c, pp. 28–29.

the speaker, and quite often without his authorisation or cooperation, which sometimes makes the textual tradition so impenetrable as to preclude a correct attribution. The sermon *On the Holy Sacrament*, which is ascribed to Ruusbroec in two manuscripts, has also been preserved among Tauler's sermons. Thematically the sermon has little in common with Ruusbroec's monumental works, but that need not stand in the way of an attribution. After all, Ruusbroec's speech to the Carthusians clearly reveals the huge difference between a sermon and the product of one's pen.³⁸

That is a reassuring observation after the philological complications arising from our attempts to distinguish a clear corpus of Ruusbroec's work. Even if all the texts attributed to Ruusbroec should prove to belong to the mystic's oeuvre, it would hardly change our image of him. On the contrary, Ruusbroec's mysticism would be shown even more convincingly to have flourished in the autonomy of the literature and seclusion of the Zonien Forest. Ruusbroec was more sure of himself as an author than as an orator. In *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* and the letter to Mechtild van Culemborg, he delved deeply into the mysteries of the Eucharist. However, the sermon on the Eucharist attributed to Ruusbroec is both more superficial and less fervent. There Christ is no 'greedy-guts' (*ghierich slockard*) but 'your faithful bridegroom' (*uwven ghetrouwen bruydegoem*). If this sermon should prove to be by Ruusbroec, we could conclude once and for all that in oral discourse he did not attempt to scale the peaks of mysticism that he ultimately attained in his carefully constructed texts.

A sermon did not provide Ruusbroec with an opportunity to lay the necessary groundwork, which is why he preferred not to reveal his mystical ideas through speech. Brother Gerard had also noticed that in his talks with the Carthusians the mystic had primarily sought to edify his audience 'in the love of God and to strengthen them in the service of the Holy Church'. When complicated questions about a union with God were put to Ruusbroec, he promised to write a text by way of clarification, which gave rise to *On the Sparkling Stone*. After his meeting with the hermit, Ruusbroec returned in writing to the complex problems they had discussed. He had a talent for prose but not the gift of eloquence. A rather touching story – but no less informative because

³⁸ Edition of the sermon in Ruusbroec, *Werken*, vol. IV, pp. 275–79. See Ampe 1964, pp. 19–22, with regard to the attribution.

of it – relates how Ruusbroec occasionally disappointed his audience. When the brothers of Groenendaal and their guests were waiting for Ruusbroec to address them, sometimes he could think of nothing to say. He then excused himself: ‘Children, take it as well meant, but this time it will come to nothing’ (*Kynder, nemet voert tgoede, het en wil te desen mael nyet worden*).³⁹

Debating made Ruusbroec feel even more ill at ease than sermonising. It was the clever know-it-alls, more interested in having the last word than in seeking the truth, who excelled at the art of disputation. Ruusbroec refused to be drawn into it. When Geert Grote put forward all kinds of arguments and biblical authorities to persuade Ruusbroec of his point, the mystic assured his learned interlocutor that his address had only strengthened him in his own convictions. Ruusbroec did not have the temperament for verbal contests; moreover, he lacked the necessary rhetorical skills. He was not practised in debate like the academic Geert Grote, nor prepared for the ministry like Johannes Tauler and his Dominican confrères. In short, Ruusbroec did not rejoice in a large audience; instead, he preferred to withdraw to the forest to concentrate on composing his treatises.

As an author Ruusbroec had little competition to fear from his Dutch contemporaries. The symbolism of the *Realm*, the adornments of the *Espousals* and the philosophical precision of the *Stone* are the pillars supporting a majestic Middle Dutch oeuvre. As a creative writer, Ruusbroec was more than an instrument in the hand of the divine scribe, or – in Pomerius’s words – ‘a capable pen of the writer who can write easily’. We may justifiably reproach Pomerius for this metaphor, which he used, surprisingly, to introduce the only chapter in *De origine* that is completely devoted to the mystic’s works – thereby giving his readers an extremely one-sided view of Ruusbroec’s authorship. *De numero et ordine suorum voluminum* (‘On the number and the order of his books’) resolutely heads the chapter containing the chronology of Ruusbroec’s works.⁴⁰ To facilitate identification, the titles are followed by the opening words of the texts. This chapter of *De origine* offers little more, despite the fact that this list marks the point in the history of Ruusbroec’s works at which the Groenendaal corpus

³⁹ Verdeyen 1981b, p. 152 (De Leu 1885, p. 296).

⁴⁰ Quotation Pomerius (‘een bequaem penne des scrivers die lichtelijc scriven kan’) in Verdeyen 1981b, p. 150 (De Leu 1885, pp. 294–95, also for the heading).

received canonical status, for Pomerius's bibliography corresponds to the contents of the standard manuscript. From that time on (c. 1420), the eleven treatises were considered Ruusbroec's complete literary legacy. The mystic's words were long gone, but his writings had been preserved for posterity – or, in a Middle Dutch variant on the time-honoured saying *Verba volant, scripta manent*:

The spoken word must die away,
while written truth will always stay.
Throughout the world it makes its way,
holds time eternal in its sway.

*Die levende stemme moet vergaen;
ghescreven waerheit bliwet staen.
Alle die werelt mach si doergaen,
alle tijt heet si bevaen.*⁴¹

3. Epilogue from Eemstein

The lines of verse at the end of the previous chapter flowed from the pen of someone who introduced himself in a rather roundabout way as 'a descendant of the clearly enlightened man, the priest Jan van Ruusbroec, who founded, with the provost, the priory at Groenendaal, one who was born in his priory after his death and received by all the convent'. This Descendant – *Nacomelinc* in Middle Dutch – talked to the brothers of Groenendaal about Ruusbroec, and studied his books with close attention. His account of the fruits of his labour is included at the end of a manuscript containing eleven treatises by Ruusbroec and Brother Gerard's prologue, as well as *On the Twelve Virtues*, two anecdotes about the good prior and Jan van Leeuwen's eulogies. Altogether the imposing codex – known among Ruusbroec philologists as manuscript D – is the most complete document on the mystic to have survived from the Middle Ages. It is mainly the Descendant's epilogue, however, which reveals how the manuscripts of Ruusbroec's collected works have contributed to his transformation into a 'clearly enlightened man' (*clær verlicht man*).⁴²

⁴¹ De Vreese 1895, p. 8.

⁴² Regarding the Descendant (*Nacomelinc*) and manuscript D, see Warnar 1993b. See also Mertens 1995a for a discussion of the manuscript's role as a Ruusbroec document, and Kienhorst & Kors 1998c with an interpretation of the facts that differs from that presented below. The quotation is in De Vreese 1895, pp. 107–08: 'een nacomelinc des

The opinions are divided as to the Descendant's identity. It has been suggested more than once that he was Jan Wisse, the first provost of the monastery of Eemstein, near Dordrecht in Holland, which was founded in 1382 on the model of Groenendaal. At that time, shortly after Ruusbroec's death, Wisse must first have come into contact with the mystic's confrères. It stands to reason that, in preparation for the founding of Eemstein, he would have inquired about Ruusbroec, Groenendaal's most famous inhabitant, although it is not known whether Wisse actually journeyed to the Zonien Forest at this time. Because the Descendant says he has studied Ruusbroec's works in his own monastery, it is still questionable whether this *Nacomelinc* was actually Jan Wisse. Nevertheless, he seems to be the most likely candidate. After all, Jan Wisse would still have had every opportunity to peruse Ruusbroec's writings, for in 1414 he was appointed prior of Groenendaal. He could then truthfully call himself the mystic's *nacomelinc*, in the modern sense of 'offspring', as well as in the then more common sense of 'successor'. This twofold meaning makes it even more plausible that Jan Wisse is the man behind the Descendant, since this ambiguous alias also sheds some light on the enigmatic statement that he was born after Ruusbroec's death and received by the common convent. In Groenendaal, Wisse was truly reborn as a *nacomelinc* – both descendant of and successor to – Prior Ruusbroec, when he was chosen to fill that position and was accepted by the monastic community.⁴³

Wisse, incidentally, was soon discharged at his own request. He returned to Eemstein, where he must have studied a book containing Ruusbroec's works and *On the Twelve Virtues*. Wisse verified the copies at his disposal and supplied the texts with enough explanation to make Ruusbroec's Brabantine idiom understandable to an audience in Holland. Furthermore, he added to the manuscript a manual for the copying and reading of Ruusbroec's works, and advised readers to study the

claer verlichts mans here Jans van Ruusbroec, die stichtede metten proest dat cloester te Groenendale, ende in sinen cloester hem na sine doot gheboren ende onfaen vanden ghemeenen convente'.

⁴³ On Wisse, see Dykmans 1940, p. 23 (and via index); Persoons 1971, pp. 1078–79; Kohl, Persoons & Weiler 1976, vol. I, p. 65 and vol. III, p. 196; Warnar 1993b. Regarding the identification of Wisse as the Descendant, see Reypens 1943, pp. 125–30 (his contention that the epilogue must have been written while Coudenberg was still alive – simply because he is referred to as the provost – does not seem compelling in the light of Wisse's play on words, i.e. *nacomelinc* meaning successor). See also Mertens 1995b, p. 70 and Kienhorst & Kors 1998, pp. 226–31, neither of which considers Wisse's later priorate or the double meaning of *nacomelinc* (cf. MNW, vol. 4, cols. 2147–48).

books in a certain order, so that they could gradually become accustomed to the mystic's teachings. He instructed readers to start with the *Twelve Virtues*, to proceed cautiously to *On the Christian Faith*, then make their way through the *Mirror*, the *Rungs*, the *Enclosures*, the *Temptations* and the *Beguines*, so that they could arrive finally at the monumental works – the *Tabernacle*, the *Realm* and the *Espousals* (in that order), after which the advanced reader could plunge into the philosophical *Stone* and the *Booklet of Clarification*.⁴⁴

In this hierarchy the *Virtues* is not distinguished from Ruusbroec's accepted body of work, and that has sometimes been put forward as an insurmountable obstacle to identifying the Descendant as Jan Wisse. Wisse, after all, must have known that the *Virtues* was not by Ruusbroec – so the reasoning goes. Nowhere, however, does Wisse give the impression that he attributes this work to Ruusbroec. Wisse discussed the *Virtues* for the simple reason that the work was included in the book of Ruusbroec's texts to which Wisse added his epilogue. In manuscript D, which was in part a reconstruction of Wisse's codex from Eemstein, the separate status of the *Virtues* is indicated by the heading *Prologus*. Wisse and the brothers of Eemstein were no doubt well aware that Ruusbroec was not the author of the *Virtues*. The text is now attributed to Ruusbroec's pupil Godfried Wevel, who travelled to Eemstein shortly after its founding to instruct the new brothers there in the spirit of Groenendaal. According to a later chronicle, Wevel did this in *verbo et scripto* – in word and writing – from which we may deduce that he wrote the *Virtues* especially for use in the religious education of the new Eemstein canons and by way of introduction to Ruusbroec's mysticism.⁴⁵

Together Wevel and Wisse set up the new monastery of Eemstein, and in this endeavour they were assisted from Groenendaal by Jan van Schoonhoven, who addressed three Latin letter-treatises to family and friends in the new monastery. Schoonhoven was so well known in Eemstein that Jan Wisse could present him without introduction to his readers as the source of the two anecdotes about Ruusbroec that he had added to his epilogue. Both stories are recounted by Pomerius in *De origine* and appeared at almost the same time in a Groenendaal manuscript full of short excerpts from Ruusbroec's works. This miscellany,

⁴⁴ De Vreese 1895, pp. 102–13, for an introduction and the edition of Wisse's text.

⁴⁵ On Wevel's mission, see Kienhorst & Kors 1998c, p. 228. For the *Virtues* as a prologue, see De Vreese 1900–02, p. 24.

dating from the first decades of the fifteenth century, could have been consulted by both Wisse and Pomerius.⁴⁶

The details gleaned from these manuscripts document an interesting collaboration at Groenendaal. The threesome Jan van Schoonhoven, Henricus Pomerius and Jan Wisse provided support for Ruusbroec at a time when Gerson's objections to the *Espousals* were still a subject of debate. Active at the same time in Groenendaal, they endeavoured to clear their venerable forefather of all blame. After his largely futile defence of Ruusbroec, Jan van Schoonhoven attempted once again to address Gerson's criticism in a sermon delivered on 14 May 1413 to the chapter meeting at Windesheim, at which time he emphatically exonerated the prior of all accusations. The occasion was opportune: Jan van Schoonhoven's sermon was intended to honour the incorporation of the Groenendaal chapter by the Windesheim chapter, which was the monastic branch of the *Devotio Moderna*. The representatives of the Brabantine convents were attending the general chapter meeting of Windesheim for the first time. The following year Jan Wisse was appointed prior of Groenendaal. Perhaps Pomerius began to work on *De origine* during Wisse's time at Groenendaal, having been commissioned to do so, as he himself said, by his prior. At any rate, the efforts to honour Ruusbroec's memory were stepped up during Wisse's short-lived priorate, and he was still in this proactive mood when he returned to Eemstein and began to write his epilogue.⁴⁷

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In the Biesbosch – a marshland created by the St Elizabeth flood of 1421 – there once stood the monastery of Eemstein, which in the late fourteenth century was a junction of sorts, a place where the literary traffic flowed between the north and south of the Low Countries at a time when the spiritual writings emanating from the monasteries of Brabant were making their way to the new religious centres of the *Devotio Moderna*. Eemstein was the point of transfer for texts travelling between Groenendaal and Windesheim. The latter monastery, near Zwolle, soon

⁴⁶ On Jan van Schoonhoven and his oeuvre, see Gruijs 1967, vol. II, pp. 27–41 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 284–89, and the literature listed. See also Warnar 1995a, p. 136. On the anecdotes attributed to Schoonhoven, which are recounted by Wisse and Pomerius, see Geirnaert & Reynaert 1993, pp. 205–07 and Kienhorst & Kors 1998c, pp. 231–37, where the Descendant is not identified as Wisse.

⁴⁷ On the sermon delivered by Schoonhoven to the chapter meeting, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 210–16 and pp. 217–39 for the dating of *De origine*.

grew into the monastic headquarters of the *Devotio Moderna*, but the cradle of the movement lay in Eemstein, where the first inhabitants of Windesheim had received their education, under the supervision of Jan Wisse and Godfried Wevel. Eemstein might have continued for a long time to be a prominent institution were it not for the catastrophic flood that washed away the entire monastery. Nothing whatsoever remained of the buildings, including the library and the scriptorium. Eemstein was rebuilt on another spot, but it never regained the momentum of its early years. Its entire collection of books had been lost, as well as the codex containing Jan Wisse's original epilogue. The copy that was preserved is now one of the few pieces of evidence that Eemstein functioned as Holland's regional base of Brabantine text dissemination and that the brothers were rightly renowned as book producers. Thus a former Eemstein brother, Dirc van Vianen, while serving as prior of Frenswegen (1401–14), also acted as a scribe: copying and correcting texts, coordinating the scribal work and preparing parchment.⁴⁸

Jan Wisse was no less industrious in this respect. His epilogue, which begins with a plea for painstaking and faithful copying, is addressed to 'all lovers of truth who read, copy or commission books'. Wisse goes on to supply his readers with brief guidelines for scribes: 'They must take a careful look at the texts, correct them faithfully or have them rectified and improved, at the very least by means of comparison with their exemplars. If these have not been properly and completely corrected, they must borrow another exemplar, but preferably collect many copies, so that in any case they may find in one or other book the correct meaning and record that one. And if they cannot find the correct meaning in their exemplar, they can write words above the line, but they must leave a space open in case the author's own words are found in other manuscripts.'⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The history of Eemstein is related in Kohl, Persoons & Weiler 1976, vol. III, pp. 183–202. On Dirc van Vianen, see Kock 1998, p. 25.

⁴⁹ De Vreese 1895, pp. 106–07: '...die boeke ernstelic oversien ende ghetrouwelic corrigeren of doen verrecchten ende verbeteren, ten minsten na horen exempelaren; en sijn die niet gherecht ende ghehelic gecorrigeert, soe selen si ander lenen of si sellenre liever veel vergaderen, op dat sy doch uut enighen, of nu uut den eenen, dan uut den anderen, den gherechten sinne vinden ende setten moghen. Ende consten si den sinne uut den exempelaer niet trecken, soe mochten si hem vervullen met woerden, ende die boven tekenen, mer laten een velt staen onder dat lichame vanden anderen scrifte, oftmen yet namaels vanden anderen scrifte des iersten dichters propere woerden vijnden mochte....'

Wisse's guidelines for a critical edition bring him completely in line with the *Devotio Moderna*, later called a 'perpetual philologists' conference' because of their stringent requirements for faithful copying. The followers of Geert Grote did not hesitate to reconstruct all manner of texts as accurately as possible from the original. Various Middle Dutch translations from the southern parts of the Low Countries were checked for accuracy and corrected where necessary. Some texts were considered beyond emendation, and the decision was then taken to have a new translation made. With the same degree of meticulousness, and armed with the knowledge he had gained in Groenendaal, Jan Wisse 'corrected very well and rightly' (*seer wel ende te recht ghecorrigeert*) the Eemstein copies of Ruusbroec's texts, naturally in so far as his 'absent-minded imprecision' (*verstroeyde grofheit*) permitted. Wisse's interventions cannot be faulted. As a good philologist should, Wisse – following his own guidelines – made marginal notes of synonyms, emendations and commentary in a way that made it clear for readers that these markings were not part of the author's text.⁵⁰

If such exemplary and sound textual treatment had become the norm, it would have saved the editors of Ruusbroec's *Opera Omnia* mountains of work. The massive variant apparatus in the critical edition proves that most scribes were a good deal more unruly in practice. In the fifteenth century, those wishing to copy one of Ruusbroec's texts would have been happy enough with any exemplar they could lay their hands on. Only once or twice does Wisse's good advice appear to have been followed. A single copy of the *Espousals* was, according to the colophon, copied 'and well corrected from two old, perfect books', one of which dated from 1363. Otherwise Wisse's epilogue seems to have had little effect on the dissemination of Ruusbroec's oeuvre. If we take stock of the distribution of his works over the northern and southern Low Countries, it cannot be said that the Eemstein codex was very influential. The core of the textual tradition lay unmistakably below the Rhine

⁵⁰ De Vreese 1895, p. 108: '...ende daer ghelike woerde van sinne of een bedudenisse der woerde of des sins buten staen, dat sijn mine woerde op die sine ende si en behoeren niet in sinen text binnen der marginen, mer si behoren buten, want si sijn op den tex ende op des goets mans woerde ende een verclaren daer of tot den ghenen die sine woerde of sinen sin niet en verstaen'. See Lievens 1995 on a Southern Netherlandish text that was revised in the Northern Netherlands, in Windesheim (see p. 319 for the 'philologists' conference'). The translation of Seuse's *Horologium* (Hoffmann 1994) underwent similar supervision. See Lub 1962 for both southern and northern Netherlandish translations of Augustine's *Manuale*.

and Meuse, particularly in the Duchy of Brabant, which had an old and rich tradition of mystical literature.⁵¹

Wisse was rowing against the tide in his own northern Netherlandish circle. As mentioned earlier, the patriarchs of the *Devotio Moderna* did not look very kindly on Middle Dutch mysticism. Religious literature in the vernacular, written for the laity, preferably consisted of books that ‘clearly treat plain or ordinary matters’.⁵² It is not voiced in so many words, but the ideologues of the *Devotio Moderna* undoubtedly found the elevated ideas expressed in the *Espousals* and the allegorical exegesis of the *Tabernacle* less suitable as lay reading. Books that did meet the requirements of their ideal reading programme were the Middle Dutch *collationales* by Dirc van Herxen, rector of the friars’ house at Zwolle and an influential man within the *Devotio Moderna*. He had amassed a huge collection of excerpts from the canon of patristic literature, translated and grouped around such themes as *On Knowing Ourselves*, *On the Discipline of Good Morals*, *On Humility*, *On Obedience* and *On Resignation*. The chronology of the last three chapters recalls the first book of the *Espousals*, but in the *collationales* Ruusbroec is conspicuous by his absence. This is all the more significant if we consider that Dirc van Herxen, a native of Zwolle, was an acquaintance of the local schoolmaster Jan Cele, who had accompanied Geert Grote on his journey to Groenendaal. It is possible that Ruusbroec had already reached Zwolle, through the agency of Cele, in the form of an old volume of sermons; nevertheless, in his *collationales*, Dirc van Herxen gives the *Espousals* a wide berth.⁵³

Jan Wisse could do nothing to change the cool reception given to the *Espousals* by the *Devotio Moderna*. This is hardly surprising, if we see in his epilogue that a single stroke of the pen was all it took for him to shift the attention from philological issues to the exalted frame of mind needed to savour the fruits of Ruusbroec’s texts. Wisse was

⁵¹ See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 69 (corrected *Espousals*) and Stoker & Verbeij 1997, pp. 235–39, regarding the text transmission. All traces of manuscripts containing Ruusbroec’s collected works hark back to the Groenendaal manuscript (see Kienhorst & Kors 1998b).

⁵² See Staubach 1994 and 1997 regarding the literary views held by the adherents of the *Devotio Moderna*; see pp. 248–53 for prayers and exercises. Quotation from De Voys 1907, p. 117: ‘pleindere of slechtere materien opelec tracteren’.

⁵³ On the *collationales* and Dirc van Herxen, see Van Buuren 1993 (with an overview of the books’ contents on pp. 249–51); see Van der Wansem 1958, p. 42, on Dirc van Herxen’s standing. See Zielemann 1978, pp. 89–309 and Zielemann 1992 on the Zwolle sermons, their provenance, the initial attribution to Cele and the influence of Ruusbroec.

thinking of readers ‘who in everything and above all else contemplate and yearn for God and whose thoughts are filled more by Him than by all activity or modes’. With great zeal Wisse heads straight for the intangible quality of mysticism that was a source of great concern to the adherents of the *Devotio Moderna*. Until the twentieth century, Jan Wisse’s enthusiasm met with scepticism. In his bulky *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* (*History of Spirituality in the Netherlands*), Axters did indeed present Jan Wisse as the last of Ruusbroec’s direct descendants, but his primary aim was to show that the glory of Groenendaal was a thing of the past: ‘In fact, we see the Descendant completely dismissing in the most explicit of terms the role of the intellect in the mystical experience, which was for Ruusbroec so substantial a part of it.’⁵⁴

So much for the *Nacomelinc*. Axters’s descendants in Dutch studies agreed unanimously that Wisse’s epilogue was not on a par with Brother Gerard’s informative and well-considered prologue. The Descendant – in their opinion – lost himself completely in a pious admiration of Ruusbroec that lagged behind the understanding of his mysticism. On closer inspection, this piece of writing is not so disappointing, and the Eemstein epilogue proves to be a spirited contribution to the discussion of Ruusbroec’s authorship, on which Gerson had passed such harsh judgement.

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As a matter of fact, Jan Wisse did not actually examine Ruusbroec’s teachings; rather, he explained the mentality needed to read his texts. Wisse was convinced that the mystic’s oeuvre revealed his extraordinary powers of mind and spirit to all those who preferred the inner life, or as Wisse expressed it more circuitously: ‘all loving, innerly enlightened people, who exercise themselves more inwardly than outwardly’. This attitude made the truly pious receptive to Ruusbroec’s wisdom, which is more heavenly than earthly and more godly than human, so that it is savoured more readily by those who prefer the eternal to the temporal: ‘Yea, he must seek love rather than knowledge,

⁵⁴ Quotation of Wisse in De Vreese 1895, p. 109: ‘die in allen ende boven allen gode aensien ende begheren ende met hem meer verbeelt sijn dan mit allen werken of wisen’. Quotation Axters 1950–60, vol. II, p. 376 (Wisse as the Descendant discussed on pp. 359–62). Later views expounded in Mertens 1995b, pp. 69–71.

and practise everything which kindles love rather than enlightens the mind, which engenders yearning rather than infuses knowledge.⁵⁵

This rather rigorous distinction was certainly not unwarranted, for Wisse's dichotomy refers to the now familiar twin concepts of knowledge and wisdom, and the concomitant notions of the intellectual and the affective in literature. He resolutely situates Ruusbroec's texts in the domain of affectivity. Wisse describes the mystic's teachings as 'particularly moving' (*sonderlinghe beweghelic*) – something he also says in the first part of the introduction about Ruusbroec's style. In both cases we must interpret this primarily as the prompting of the affective powers. This 'moving' kindles desire more than it enlightens the intellect. Wisse's opinion is no different from that of Gerson, who said of the stylistic devices in the second book of the *Espousals* that they stirred the affective powers rather than acting effectively on the intellect and reason. The big difference between Wisse and Gerson is that Gerson would have preferred to see the opposite. The chancellor believed that writings expounding divine truths must be soundly rooted in theology. Wisse takes the standpoint that those who let themselves be guided by their intellect alone will never manage to penetrate Ruusbroec's world: 'To those who practise reason and distinction, instead of letting love overcome reason, these teachings will be unfathomable and often unacceptable' (*Die oec meer oefenen reden ende ondersceit dan sy met minnen boven redene comen, dien is dese leer onbekent ende dicwijl cume ghemint*). To understand Wisse's point one must realise that his remarks date from after his Groenendaal priorate – that is to say, after Gerson's pronouncements on the *Espousals*. This suggests that Wisse was taking a stand against the chancellor, and that gives the epilogue a completely different connotation than it had in Axters's perception of the text.⁵⁶

Affectivity is more important than the intellect in the appreciation of Ruusbroec's texts. Wisse presses home this point with a quotation from Bernard: 'the measure of loving God is without measure' (*die mate gode te minnen is sonder mate*). In the ode to mystic love which then follows, Wisse is out of his depth, stylistically speaking, as he lapses into obscure

⁵⁵ De Vreese 1895, p. 109: 'allen minnende inwendighen verclaerden menschen, die eer inwaerder dan uutwaerder hem oefenen'; 'Ja, hi moet meer zoeken minnen dan kennen, ende meer oefenen al dat minne onsteect dan dat het verstant verlicht, dat begheert verweert meer dan dat kennisse instort.'

⁵⁶ Wisse quotations in De Vreese 1895, pp. 108 and 110; for Gerson's pronouncement, see Ampe 1975a, p. 59.

language about a ‘gazing without images and an unreasonably hungry inclination towards that divine essential fire’ (*onghebeelt staren ende onredelic hongherich neighen tot in dat godlike weselike vier*). Despite his diligent study of ‘the manner of our father’s [Ruusbroec’s] beautiful expositions’ (*die maniere van ons vaders scone voirtbringhen*), Wisse did not succeed in striking Ruusbroec’s balanced tone. Indeed, he would have been the first to admit this. In his ode to Ruusbroec, Wisse used big words, but he seems uncertain when it comes to the content of the mystic’s works. He was not the only one. Pomerius frankly confessed – albeit with a rhetorical flourish – that despite all his efforts ‘to learn the natural art of philosophy’ (*om te leren die natuerlike kunst der philozophien*), he had not yet covered half of Ruusbroec’s route to heaven.⁵⁷

This realisation that the divine is inaccessible to the human mind characterises a new phase in the history of medieval mysticism. Bold and intellectually demanding speculation on the contemplation of God in His essence made way for a more widely accessible but less ambitious spirituality, the heart of which was a yearning for the Highest. Not everyone could acquiesce in this reduction of spirituality to the lowest common denominator. In Middle Dutch literature, the idea of direct access to God’s higher truths continued to find exponents among such followers of Ruusbroec as Hendrik Mande, whose profound knowledge of Brabantine mysticism – including the letters of Hadewijch – justify the assumption that Mande, like Wisse, had inhaled the air of Groenendaal. Both Dutchmen had a thing or two in common when it came to their approach to Ruusbroec’s work and the assimilation of it into their own religious culture. Mande, in his compilations and adaptations, remade the mystical theology from the Zonien Forest into a personal manual of spiritual life. Wisse had the same open-minded attitude. He sidestepped problems of interpretation by focusing the discussion of Ruusbroec’s oeuvre on the attitude needed to study it. To acquire mystical wisdom, one must read more with the heart than with the mind, and that led irrevocably to an appreciation of Ruusbroec’s work in which the affective aspect was dominant.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Wisse quotations in De Vreese 1895, p. 113 (with emendation: *neighen* instead of *enighen*) and p. 112; for the Pomerius quotation, see Verdeyen 1981b, p. 126 (De Leu 1885, p. 273).

⁵⁸ De Vreese 1895, p. 109. See Willeumier-Schalij 1981 on Mande as an epigone of Ruusbroec and the reaction to this in Mertens 1986, pp. 395–430. Van Mierlo 1909 on Hendrik Mande’s paraphrase of Hadewijch’s letters. Mande’s familiarity with Brabantine mysticism became apparent earlier from his use of the Brussels compendium (see VI.2).

Wisse's epilogue echoes the idea of Ruusbroec's higher authority first developed by Brother Gerard, whose introduction to the mystic was probably known to Wisse. Their views of the revered author cease to correspond, however, when Wisse prefers 'yearningly savouring' (*begheerlic smaken*) to 'clearly seeing' (*verstandelic sien*). In his view, those who drank the wine of Ruusbroec's teachings lost, like the drunkard, their intellectual powers of vision but retained their affective sense of taste. Brother Gerard would not have agreed with this, any more than Gerson, to whom Wisse's statement was addressed. Spiritual inebriation was not for Brother Gerard, who preferred to keep a level head: 'in higher teachings we practise our understanding with zeal'.⁵⁹

Brother Gerard and Jan Wisse can serve as models for the later currents in Ruusbroec research. As early editors of the mystic's texts, they were the forerunners of the solid philological tradition still honoured by the Ruusbroec Society and recently crowned by the completion of the critical edition of Ruusbroec's *Opera Omnia*. Furthermore, the introductions to the mystic by Brother Gerard and Jan Wisse represent the two directions that eventually became prominent in the scholarly study of Ruusbroec: theology and spirituality. Brother Gerard attempted, by means of the formal structure of an *accessus*, to arrive at an objective assessment, whereas Wisse had a much more empathetic approach. The latter held Ruusbroec in high regard, and trusted that his readers would be swept away by his texts into the infinite love that unites one with God. Brother Gerard, on the other hand, makes no mention of this mystical love, though he does focus on the grammatical purity of Ruusbroec's 'pronominal articles' (*pronominael artikelen*). He explained Ruusbroec's 'pure Brussels Dutch' (*onvermingheden Brusselschen dietsche*) as arising from his need for clarity, for 'this author sought to teach the full truth perfectly' (*dese auctoer meinde die volle waerheit volcomelic te leren*). Thus Brother Gerard blithely ignored all medieval disputes about theology in the vernacular, which is typical of his somewhat technical approach, for his prologue betrays the influence of the grammar and logic taught at school. Jan Wisse, by contrast, was a less critical judge. In his eyes Ruusbroec's teachings – he hardly discusses individual texts – had nothing to do with erudition or applied knowledge, but rather

See Mertens 1995a and Willeumier-Schalij 1990 on the changes in fifteenth-century mystical literature.

⁵⁹ De Vreese 1895, p. 11 (Brother Gerard: 'in hogher leringhen oefenen wij onse verstandenisse met nernste') and p. 110 (Jan Wisse).

with pure wisdom, for ‘the Holy Spirit moves one to loving rather than knowing, to undergoing rather than doing, to being rather than having’ (*die heilige geest beweecht meer tot minnen dan tot kennen, tot liden dan tot doen, tot wesen dan tot hebben*).⁶⁰

Wisse’s woolly language lacks the precision of Brother Gerard’s prologue. Nevertheless, the oft-maligned Descendant did explain in part why the *Espousals* continues to be read. For while most medieval Dutch texts have become museum pieces, just like the manuscripts in which they are preserved, interest in the *Espousals* still prompts adaptations, anthologies and translations. Ruusbroec wrote literature about everlasting truths, in which absolute ‘being’ (*wesen*) goes beyond temporal ‘having’ (*hebben*). Even in his own day, Ruusbroec probably did not sound very modern. By contrast, the magistrates’ clerk Jan van Boendale, active at approximately the same time, was much more a man of his times, with an eye for social change. He propagated a new ethic aimed at upward mobility. Knowledge of religion was important to Boendale, but in *Der leken spiegel* (*The Layman’s Mirror*) he also wrote about sound government, the public good, the work ethic, respect for the individual and self-preservation. That Boendale thus stood at the cradle of middle-class literary culture in Dutch is interesting from a historical viewpoint, but his time-bound modernity caused his texts to age rapidly. For an edition of *Der leken spiegel* in book form, Dutch specialists must still turn to the pioneering work done by the Leiden professor Matthias de Vries between 1844 and 1848. That was ten years before the Flemish priest Jan Baptiste David began to compile a modern edition of Ruusbroec’s works, but the many subsequent editions and translations of the mystic’s texts have more than made up for the previous lack of interest. For it is precisely the abstract element in Ruusbroec’s writings on the inner life that still attracts readers to a literary world in which pondering the absolute is proof against all relativism.⁶¹

⁶⁰ De Vreese 1895, p. 19 (Brother Gerard) and p. 109 (Jan Wisse).

⁶¹ Langer 1994, pp. 108–10, regarding a historical account of mysticism that benefits from socio-religious insights on the relative and absolute in religion. Pleij 1991 passim on Boendale; cf. contributions in Reynaert *et al.* 1994. Edition of *Der leken spiegel* in De Vries 1844–48; first edition of Ruusbroec’s works in David & Snellaert 1858–68. Von Arnswaldt previously published four texts by Ruusbroec after German manuscripts from his own collection (Von Arnswaldt 1848). See exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 489–96, for an overview of anthologies and text editions.

4. Fireworks and Feasting

On the afternoon of 1 December 1681, the canons of the Church of St Gudula arrived in Groenendaal to attend the annual celebrations commemorating Jan van Ruusbroec's death on 2 December 1381. The visitors were given a festive welcome, complete with a peal of bells and three volleys fired by a field-artillery regiment, which had been called in for the occasion, for it was exactly three hundred years to the day that Ruusbroec had breathed his last. The cannon shots signalled the start of the festivities, beginning the following morning with a meeting in the 'magnificently and richly' (*magnifick ende costelijck*) painted monastery church. The high point of the Mass, which included musical accompaniment, was the learned sermon – greeted with applause – delivered by Robertus Cusacque, doctor of theology. The sermon was followed by three volleys which made the window panes rattle. After the religious ceremony, the company – numbering seventy altogether – proceeded to the decorated refectory to take their places at table. Music and singing contributed to their enjoyment of the meal. Before the conclusion of the evening's festivities, the party made their way to the Groenendaal pond, where a platform with ten barrels of pitch was set alight. This great spectacle was also accompanied by music, and as if that were not enough, three more volleys were fired, this time by no fewer than ten cannon, which could be heard in the forest as far as four miles away. Praise was lavished on the proceedings before the brothers of Groenendaal and their guests retired for the night.

The second day featured verbal fireworks. Under the chairmanship of the sub-prior of Groenendaal, two confrères defended 'theological theses expressly prepared for the occasion'. Both participants gave praiseworthy performances, and after the debate everyone sat down to a copious meal. The evening ended with another bonfire on the pond. The company did not break up until the following morning, after a farewell drink was served in the courtyard: the excellent Rhine wine that had flowed so liberally during the whole of the festivities. The guests' departure from Groenendaal was marked by – what else? – 'the firing of the cannon'. The clerics of the Brussels chapter made their way home, satisfied at how well the event had gone: 'and so we returned to Brussels without mishap'.⁶²

⁶² For an account of the festivities, see De Ridder 1993.

Thus ends a handwritten account of the Ruusbroec memorial celebration of 1681, an account which surfaced three centuries later, when the archives of the Chapter of St Gudula were inventoried. It is a unique document, rich in arresting detail, but what surprises us the most is that Jan van Ruusbroec is hardly mentioned. This can be blamed in part on the lack of interest displayed by our anonymous reporter, who was far less moved by the debate than by the fireworks. Apart from this, though, the account does not give the impression that there was much time for earnest remembrance of Ruusbroec – in sharp contrast to the large exhibitions and scholarly conferences held to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Ruusbroec's death in 1981.⁶³

In 1681 the assembled clerics probably paid a brief visit to the chapel where Ruusbroec's remains had lain for the last fifty years. It would be difficult to say, however, whether anyone actually glanced at the painstakingly compiled manuscript of Ruusbroec's collected works. A seventeenth-century debater in theology would probably have perused Surius's oft-reprinted Latin edition. For the most part the guests would have been reminded of Ruusbroec in the refectory, where they spent many hours dining between walls decorated with more than twenty paintings depicting scenes from his life. A brochure printed the same year, describing the miraculous scenes on which dinner guests at Groenendaal could feast their eyes, makes it clear that nearly all the paintings were based on episodes from Pomerius's chronicle of the priory.⁶⁴

The panels usually hung in Groenendaal's large cloister, where they were viewed in 1627 by François-Nicolas Dubuisson-Aubenay. Somewhat surprised, this French nobleman wrote in his journal that the brothers of Groenendaal considered Ruusbroec a saint, and that large sums of money had been spent to bring about his canonisation. More than three centuries after Gerson's nearly fatal intervention, Groenendaal again dared to hope for Ruusbroec's admission into the calendar of saints. In 1622 Ruusbroec's remains had once more been exhumed, this time under the supervision of the ecclesiastical authorities, who certified that the mystic's bones were authentic before they were distributed among several relic cases and placed in the church at Groenendaal. In the same year a chapel was built in honour of

⁶³ With regard to exhibitions and conferences devoted to the mystic, see exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, Mommaers & De Paepe 1984, Bos & Warnar 1993 and Mertens (ed.) 1995. Cf. Warnar 1993b and De Baere 1994.

⁶⁴ Ampe 1974, pp. 14–32 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, no. 201.

Ruusbroec on the spot in the Zonien Forest where the mystic had been discovered in a state of rapture by his worried confrères. The money to build the chapel had been donated by Archduchess Isabella. This pious ruler of the Southern Netherlands used her personal influence to plead for Ruusbroec's canonisation at the Holy See, but her efforts were in vain. No doctrinal difficulties stood in the way of canonisation this time; rather, the procedures came to a standstill owing to lack of funds. In the end, Ruusbroec was not beatified until 1908.⁶⁵

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Despite the efforts to make him a saint, interest in Ruusbroec as a Middle Dutch author was at a low ebb in the early seventeenth century. Exceptions were the Capuchin friar Gabriël van Antwerpen, who in 1624 had published his edition of the *Espousals*, and the Groenendaal brother Jacobus Isabeels, who died in 1622. Rumour had it that this ancient cleric had not only preached and written about the mystic, but had also copied his works. His younger confrères reported that Isabeels regularly prayed – kneeling, and with outstretched arms – at the grave of their first prior.

Isabeels would never have doubted the generally accepted image of the mystic as one of God's elect, any more than Van Antwerpen, whose introduction to his edition of the *Espousals* included a biography of Ruusbroec based on Pomerius. Only a casual visitor like Dubuisson-Aubenay was surprised at the amount of money spent on the longed-for canonisation of the revered prior. Just as in earlier times it had been outsiders like Gerson who had voiced reservations about the one-sided claims of Ruusbroec's divine inspiration, in the twentieth century it was also outside observers who questioned Pomerius's reliability as a biographer. Ruusbroec's faithful followers, however, persisted in adhering to Pomerius as the most important source for the life of the mystic. In 1933 and 1936 the Brussels archivist Placide Lefèvre published two articles in which he argued that there was no evidence whatever, apart from Pomerius, for many of the so-called facts of Ruusbroec's life. Both articles were follow-ups to earlier remarks – appearing in a newspaper interview, no less – which Lefèvre had made about publications by members of the newly founded Ruusbroec Society, which

⁶⁵ See Porteman 1993 and exhib. cat. Ruusbroec 1981, pp. 363–68, regarding the initiatives to promote Ruusbroec's canonisation, and no. 146 for the chapel funded by Isabella. See Gaspar 1937, pp. 343–45, for Dubuisson-Aubenay's journal.

still took Pomerius's words as the gospel truth. In 1931 they had collaborated on the production of a memorial book to commemorate the 550th anniversary of Ruusbroec's death. This volume included a biography of the mystic by Desiderius Stracke. Judging by the title – 'Jan van Ruusbroec's leven en karakter' ('Jan van Ruusbroec's Life and Character') – the author was confident that he could read the mystic's mind.⁶⁶

In attempting to fathom Ruusbroec's psyche, Stracke did not appeal even once to the sources that might have brought him closest to the author's personality – namely, his texts. Stracke did not draw any parallels between the mystic's earthly existence and his lofty ideas, and Lefèvre's deliberately provocative source criticism did nothing to change this. On the contrary, the exposure of Pomerius as a hagiographer seemed only to drive an even bigger wedge between Ruusbroec's writings and his life. A historical approach was not forthcoming either, after Father Albert Ampe, leader of the second generation of Ruusbroec Society scholars, published a book in 1975 on the history of six centuries of interest in the mystic and his work. Ampe recorded views ranging from the dedicatory letter that Willem Jordaens wrote to accompany his Latin *Espousals* to the *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* (*History of Spirituality in the Netherlands*), completed in 1960 by Stephanus Axters, a Dominican church historian who titled his volume on the fourteenth century *De eeuw van Ruusbroec* (*Ruusbroec's Century*). The historical importance of the mystic could not have been expressed more clearly, but until well into the 1980s the great interest taken in Ruusbroec – one that was remarkably international for an author writing in Dutch – continued to come primarily from the fields of theology and spirituality.⁶⁷

This doctrinal and philosophical interest had a deleterious effect only on Ruusbroec's position in Dutch literature. This was the result of far-reaching specialisation that turned the study of mystical texts into an independent sub-discipline within the study of medieval Dutch literature. The religious engagement in this branch of scholarship led to

⁶⁶ See Dykmans 1940, p. 93, on Isabeels. Cf. Lefèvre 1933 and 1936, and Stracke 1931. On the stir created by Lefèvre, see Ampe 1975a, pp. 645–49. See also Van Mierlo 1933, p. 305, n. 1.

⁶⁷ Ampe 1975a. Axters 1950–60, vol. II. Axters 1975 is a prompt and respectful reaction to Ampe's book. The most important and worthwhile exception to the tendency to separate Ruusbroec's life and work is Janssens 1981.

a highly thematic and rather exegetical study of mystical texts, which did not make it any easier to include Ruusbroec's works in the normal course of literary-historical research. Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that research into the historical antecedents of Ruusbroec's mystical prose was a long time in coming. The need to focus on his authorship as a medieval undertaking did not actually make itself felt until several changes of tack steered the study of Middle Dutch literature into the stream of cultural history, at which time the importance of Groenendaal as a literary circle, with Ruusbroec at its centre, was recognised.⁶⁸

This does not mean that the biography of Ruusbroec presented here is merely an attempt to make amends. By reconstructing our image of Ruusbroec as an author we are able to see the relationships within fourteenth-century Dutch literature from a new perspective. For whichever way we look at it – and regardless of how we view religious literature in relation to the *Reinaert*, the romance of chivalry and other genres that determine our traditional picture of Middle Dutch literature – Ruusbroec and his works have in past decades been given insufficient attention in discussions of the broad lines in Netherlandish literature. Some of the more significant findings in this book concern Ruusbroec's pioneering role – though admittedly one he did not aspire to – in breaching the barriers between scholarly thought and lay literature in his mother tongue. When he began work on the *Espousals*, Maerlant had already transferred a great deal of knowledge from Latin to the vernacular by means of adaptations and translations. Ruusbroec went one step further with his independent compositions. He was not the first but certainly the most influential of the authors responsible for turning Dutch into a fully fledged and intellectually vigorous language of literature. Dante and Eckhart are considered key figures in the late medieval history of ideas, because – writing in Italian and German – they broke open the Latinate culture of professional scholarship and introduced a new audience to the world of thought and intellectual experience. There is, in fact, sufficient reason to ascribe the same role to Ruusbroec in the sphere of Middle Dutch.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Cf. Van Oostrom 1996b and, with regard to English literature, cf. Watson 1999. Observations dealing more specifically with the study of Netherlandish mysticism and Ruusbroec are to be found in Warnar 1994, p. 185 and Warnar 1999a, pp. 365–68 and 385–86.

⁶⁹ De Libera 1996, pp. 299–349 (on the de-professionalisation of philosophy and the

Gerson's harsh condemnation of the *Espousals* and the heated reaction of the brothers in Groenendaal have long deflected attention from the mystic as a thinker and writer. Instead, he has gone down in history primarily as a 'clearly enlightened man' (*clær verlicht man*). In the field of literary history, too, Ruusbroec's work was long eschewed as theology or relegated to the sphere of religious experience. By and large, this is the result of modern ideas about art, religion and science as separate fields of interpretation. Ruusbroec's century knew no such distinctions. Literature, religion and science were united in a broad notion of learning – *clergie* in Middle Dutch, encompassing a wide range of meanings, including 'the practice of the sciences', 'book-learning', 'scholarship', 'theology' and 'knowledge' – in which thought and devotion, science and wisdom existed side by side, albeit not necessarily peacefully. Ruusbroec's world was a minefield of controversies, radical ideas and dissident movements. The fourteenth century was not yet acquainted with the fast-paced sensationalism of today's media, but the circles around Ruusbroec – first in Brussels, and later in Groenendaal – were abuzz with gossip from the intellectual centres of Cologne and Paris. The mystic was forced to find his way in a labyrinth of contradictory opinions, and debate was taking place more than ever before in the vernacular.

Ruusbroec's writing was also affected by his place in society, which was determined both by his position as chaplain, hermit and canon regular, and by the milieu in which we must seek his earliest readers: friends of God associated with the Church of St Gudula, faithful followers in the Groenendaal chapel and, later on, pupils, admirers and visitors to a fully functioning priory.

This book is the result of a search for the answers to relatively simple questions about the background of Ruusbroec's works, in which the *Espousals*, the most successful Middle Dutch book of all time, was considered a watershed in the mystic's life, since before that time he had lived anonymously as a chaplain. The circulation of the *Espousals* turned him into a public figure, whose admirers attributed him with the divine gifts of higher insight into man's relation to the Supreme Being. Even so, Ruusbroec's days were mainly shaped by the rural tranquillity

'experience of thought', pp. 13 and 334–37 (regarding Dante and Eckhart). Reactions to this are found in, for instance, Aertsen 1995, pp. 121–24. In connection with Ruusbroec, see the earlier Warnar 2000a and 2002b.

and liturgical regularity of Groenendaal. As prior and author, however, Ruusbroec was given greater responsibilities. He gradually began to attach more importance to conveying his ideas clearly, and came to recognise more easily the issues his followers were struggling with. How, for example, should the mystical thought in the *Espousals* be put into practice to enable one to proceed from the forecourt of virtuous life to the tabernacle of contemplation and finally to the *sanctum sanctorum* graced by God's presence?

Ruusbroec wrote *On the Spiritual Tabernacle* for his like-minded confrères, but he also received appeals from outside Groenendaal. Though it perhaps made him ill at ease, he honoured requests from women to provide them with spiritual handbooks. We know from Brother Gerard that Ruusbroec went to visit the Carthusians of Herne, but how many times did the mystic actually take to the road in order to explain his teachings? His whole life long, Ruusbroec remained firmly convinced that his thought and writings could elucidate the great truths of human existence: 'And I will prove this to you by nature, by reason, and by the Holy Scriptures, by examples and by all creatures, by the truth that God Himself is, and by everything that He has created from the beginning of the world.'⁷⁰

With these words Ruusbroec launched – halfway through the *Beguines* – a new project, full of optimism that he could once more demonstrate (*prueven*) that the firmament reflected the mystical universe of the soul. He thus sought in his writings to reveal God's presence as an objective truth to be found in Creation and in Holy Scripture, a truth which he himself must have experienced much more forcefully as a spiritual reality. We cannot bridge the distance between the author and the mystic, however. In Jan van Leeuwen's eyes, there was no one so 'illuminated and enlightened by the highest union with God' as Ruusbroec, but at the same time the mystic's most faithful disciple asked himself whether the teachings in Ruusbroec's books were not merely a weak reflection of his turbulent inner life. Van Leeuwen thus recognised the true miracle of the *Espousals*. Like all literature of enduring merit, Ruusbroec's works harbour the secret of which they are an everlasting expression.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Beguines* 2a/687–90: 'Ende dit willic u prueven met natueren, met redenen, ende metter heiligher scriftueren, met exempen ende met allen creatueren, metter waerheit die god selve is ende met al dien dat hi ghescapen hevet van beghinne der werelt.'

⁷¹ De Vreese 1895, p. 253 and, for the Van Leeuwen quotation, p. 256: 'verlicht ende vercleert uter hoechster eennicheit gods'.

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1. *Dat boeckken der verclaringhe* (*The Booklet of Clarification*)
2. *Vanden seven sloten* (*On the Seven Enclosures*)
3. *Die geestelike brulocht* (*The Spiritual Espousals*)
4. *Dat rijke der ghelieven* (*The Realm of Lovers*)
- 5–6. *Van den geesteliken tabernakel* (*On the Spiritual Tabernacle*)
- 7a–b. *Van den XII beghinen* (*On the Twelve Beguines*)
8. *Een spiegel der ewigher salicheit* (*A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*)
9. *Van seven trappen* (*On Seven Rungs*)
10. *Vanden blinkenden steen, Vanden vier becoringhen, Vanden kerstenen ghelove, Brieven* (*On the Sparkling Stone, On the Four Temptations, On the Christian Faith, Letters*)

Abbreviations

AGN: D.P. Blok *et al.* (eds.), *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*. Haarlem & Weesp, 1977–83, 11 vols.

BNM: *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (<http://bnm.leidenuniv.nl>)

DS: M. Viller *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique. Histoire et doctrine*. Paris, 1932–95, 17 vols.

DWB: *Dietsche Warande en Belfort*

ESB: *Eigen Schoon en de Brabander*

HKZM: *Handelingen der Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde*

NAK: *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*

NTg: *De Nieuwe Taalgids*

OGE: *Ons Geestelijk Erf*

PL: *Patrologia latina*

RLW: *Jan van Ruusbroec. Leven. Werken*. Onder de redactie van het Ruusbroec-genootschap Antwerpen. Mechelen & Amsterdam, 1931.

TNTL: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*

VL: B. Wachinger *et al.* (eds.), *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*. Berlin, 1978–99, 10 vols.

VMKVA: *Verlagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde*

ZfdA: *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*

ZfdPh: *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*

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- 2 Ruusbroec Society, Antwerp, collection of prints.
- 3 Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 8469, f. 7v.
- 4 Ruusbroec Society, Antwerp, collection of prints.
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- 6 Brussels, Royal Library, Printroom, Hollar plano s. II 41.850.
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